

# Aador

**First part of an autobiographical fiction**

by Najubai Gavit

Translated from the Marathi by  
Shobha Pawar



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*For all the tribal sisters and brothers for their creative struggle*

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## Foreword

In the corridors of history of the social movements carried out successfully by devoted and dedicated members of the tribal community, Najubai Gavit undoubtedly enjoys a prominent place. She not only speaks the idiom of social justice and change but adds another dimension of meaning through her activism, her indomitable perseverance and deep involvement in the work she is engaged in. *Aador* is her first attempt to showcase her life's experience by scripting it for us for posterity. 'It is an autobiographical fiction,' says Najubai. The novel dramatises the downs (rampant) and ups (rare) in the real life of the tribal communities in Bodharepadha, Bhilati and a few nearby hamlets in the Sakri taluka of Dhulia district of Maharashtra. It is easier to call *Aador* fiction because there are characters, action and locations mentioned, with occasional references to the times in which the characters move and speak, live or die. However, the distinction between life and literature blurs as one reads through the pages; one stands face to face with life.

Najubai Gavit, a woman born in the Mavchi tribe and brought up in the world of poverty, blind-belief, superstition and exploitation, does not mince words. Her pen dips deep into the unattended fatal wounds of her fellow tribal people—wounds of poverty, exploitation, death and disease. She successfully brings to light the lethal bite, whether of a serpent or of slavery, of hunger or of violence in the world of the tribal people, conveniently overlooked by the civilised world for ages. In her portrait gallery you will find the derelict from the hamlets on the edge of thick forests, the helpless and the humbled who submit to god, spirits and the priest, along with the victims of forced motherhood and domestic violence. On the other hand, there is a band of the depraved, ruthless victimisers: the forest guards, government officers, local money-lenders like the grocers and Shahu Patil.

Written originally in Marathi, the narrative has the flavour of the tribal dialect that shakes an urban reader out of his/her reverie. The actual life of the tribal people is hard-hitting. The life of the Bhil and Mavchi tribes depicted in this novel is essentially different from the tribal life lived in harmony with nature in the Vindhya and Satpura region. The former is closer to the plight of the dalits. Over the years the tribal people too have witnessed changes—*mahua* liquor has been replaced by foreign wines, toffees and biscuits have taken the place of wild berries such as *umber*, *peeper* or *payar*. They may be earning rupees instead of annas now, but there is no change in the injustice, poverty and exploitation, whether at the hands of government officers or salaried urban people who haggle over prices and bargain to their advantage in any dealing with the tribal poor; nor has the treachery of the money-lender changed. Surprisingly, Najubai's pen is not shy of uncovering the ugly and the ominous in both the camps. This transparent simplicity of intention and diction of the narrator leaves no scope for footnotes. Besides, the strictly observed absence of the rhetorical—typical of the literature of protest—lends the narrative greater provocative power.

Najubai's writing is certainly a part of a wider spectrum of creative writing of the tribal people. However, critics might complain that when placed beside the literature of commitment, it fails to offer the direction of social change. Unfortunately, this is true. Critics may even say that it fails to bring out the strength of tribal life, except for one or two incidents, throwing light on their spirit of unity or their broader and liberal view of sexual relations. This is equally true. This work certainly does not belong to the category of writing where an ideological commitment with the tribal people's right to land and forest is vehemently argued for and upheld. Or, for that matter, it is not a work that probes rationally into the socio-political reasons of their poverty. In *Aador* even their customs and rituals—be it marriage or a funeral—come to us not in a broader perspective of distinctive cultural practices but as a part of life of individuals. Nevertheless, I think the story cannot be discounted for these reasons. On the contrary, it comes alive because it refuses to luxuriate in dialectic. It presents in all sincerity, honesty and lucidity what the author has felt



on her pulse. Her words come from the depth of truth, powerful enough to invite the reader to plunge in and drift along, only to land on unknown shores.

One cannot deny that *Aador* has the power to stir and move the readers. It stands in perfect contrast with the cosy comforts of the urban, salaried and the high-born. This work has the power to jeopardise the solid, secure foundations of our life by pricking our conscience. It creates a ruffle that also entails social change. A woman worker's sensibility and passionate objectivity that inspired a work such as *Aador* has roused my expectations. I hope that the literature of the tribal people, though in a nascent stage, will soon be recognised as a substantial body of literature along with dalit literature. It goes without saying that Sharad Patil and the Marxists have a significant role to play in this journey as they did in shaping the mind of an activist as Najubai.

Medha Patkar  
1995

## Our 'Primary Communist': Tribal Ancestor

Our original ancestor was a happy man and self-sufficient too. He always carried his chest of happiness on his sleeve. The spring was over and the blossoms of *shiri* had faded. Notwithstanding, a gentle breeze brought the fragrance of shiri from some unknown bower. He was excited. In gay abandon, he desperately searched for the flowers. His passion took him to ransack the vast territory dotted by the stripped shiri trees. Frenzied as he was by the unexpected, maddening scent of the flower, he rambled on and would not rest even for a minute. Finally, he found it. Just a single flower at the top of a tree on the edge of the shiri Empire! Without wasting even a moment, he put down his chest and climbed the tree hurriedly. He plucked the flower and smelt it. Every cell in his body felt the scent and he let himself be lost in ecstasy of the fragrance.. He climbed down after a while and looked for his chest. The chest was gone. The Shahu had run away with it. Since that day we, the tribals, have been living in penury.

A Folktale

## **My Story!**

This narrative is a humble attempt to portray in detail my tribal life. It begins before my birth and will not necessarily end with my death. You will not find me in every incident. However, my tribal brethren who are no less than my kith and kin, occupy every page of this narrative. I wish they would appear as they are. They are portrayed in true colours. I belong to the Mavchi tribe. Obviously, this part of the narrative predominantly portrays the life of this tribe. It also mirrors the life of the Bhil tribe but the Konkanis are only referred to. This is the first part of my autobiographical fiction. Asha in this part represents me. I am working on other parts of this narrative — ‘Rop’, ‘Lavni’ and ‘Porali’ will be published later.

Najubai Gavit

## Preface

It is a truth to be acknowledged that tribal literature in India, as elsewhere in the world, is no longer limited to just a few folk tales and folk songs, handed down orally from one generation to another. The maverick voices of the tribals that make themselves heard today in print and histrionics as well have forced the intelligentsia, the academics as well as literary forums and institutions to shed their age-old beliefs and prejudices against the community. Magazines such as *Dhol* and *Lokakshar* and the Budhan Theatre in Ahmedabad are proof enough of the new dimensions of their artistic expression.

*Aador* is Najubai Gavit's commendable effort to articulate, without art, lived moments of her freckled life. Interestingly, it traces her journey into another language, Marathi, not her mother-tongue; journey as portrait of a self divided, diffused and yet, indubitably transparent. The identity of this self is fluid and difficult for us to fix. The connection between the pen and the pain may be classical. However, for a tribal woman to bring herself to translate her life into fiction must have been an arduous journey. In *Aador* there is apparently no special effort on the part of the writer to construct a work of art. Selection of detail looks random, freeing the author from the burden of aesthetic norms. No special artistry is required to sketch the muddle of life lived in dire poverty, threatened with disease and death in the interiors of the forests, a terrain of potential pleasure and pain as well. The distinction between life and art vanishes as you turn the pages.

The narrator in *Aador* refuses to indulge in the romance of nostalgia for the past or to fly high with a utopian dream, the popular strongholds of urban, bourgeois writers. It seems that for Najubai, time past and time future are compressed in time present and she has only the present to work on. That is why Najubai's writing is free from protest and propaganda. She opens one window after another,

perhaps casually and without a purpose, for us to glimpse the strange and the unfamiliar world of the tribal, in the style of a documentary, endorsed by the conspicuous absence of adjectives and adverbs. However, left unvarnished in this journey, the reader is forced to think as he scrambles to relocate himself.

The tribal, like the Dalit, has many areas in common with a postcolonial writer. Both are culturally, linguistically and politically different from and suppressed by their dominant counterparts in their own country. Writing, as their response to the encounter and interaction between the two, is bound to be fraught with double trouble. First, it is translation of the self and then translation of their experience in a language in the written form. The trouble could be further multiplied when such a writer chooses to write in a language not her own. Many Celtic writers as the Welsh, the Irish, the Scottish must have experienced the double trouble when they chose to write in English. When Najubai chooses to write in Marathi (not her mother-tongue) her struggle for negotiation is reflected in her choice of diction marked by words and terms drawn directly from her tribal language. For any writer to carry out creative writing in a language, not one's own, entails a double translation. Many nouns, verbs and pronouns used in *Aador* resonate the tribal culture. One can only imagine the unease of the translator when the same was to be translated into English. Moreover, language is not just an innocent act of naming. Every language is rooted in a specific culture and some experiences are the collective property of the specific culture. The target language may not have the linguistic repertoire to carry the load of culture specific to the source language. When creative writers find themselves in a bind of this kind, they resort to use of original words from their native language, as Chinua Achebe, the African writer, did. Language cannot be divorced from culture. In literary translations the translator has to negotiate carefully to safeguard the cultural element. S/he may take the same road as the creative writer. There is a ton of truth when Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevere, in 1990, spoke about the 'cultural turn' in translation, "—neither the word, nor the text, but the culture becomes the operational unit of translation."

If culture is to be prioritized, use of local dialectal words is fully justified. They may include slangs or allusions or metaphors or simply

a pronoun. Lawrence Venuti, a widely acclaimed and quoted scholar in translation studies, aptly describes it as ‘foreignization’ of translation. The rest, according to him is ‘domesticating’. One may say that translation is an act of negotiation between ‘foreignization’ and ‘domestication’ not only at the level of language but on a much wider scale.

It is common knowledge that death of a language entails death of a culture and culture is the sum total of the achievements and failures of a society, a community, whether minority or majority. It is a wisdom bank. Tribal culture too has many treasures. The need to unlock this treasure-house has become more urgent with globalisation. The tribal people’s tryst with environment, their practice of equality of men and women, their traditional knowledge of naturopathy, their belief in the preservation of the community (not of the individual as Darwin would have had it) is a legacy made available to the world through their writings. It is no wonder that, with the rise of postcolonial literature there is a boom in postcolonial translation. When entities collide, identities clash and translation becomes an accessible tool to disperse and re-present oneself.

Translating *Aador*, an autobiographical piece of writing by a tribal woman writer, was a rewarding experience. There is an engagement with issues related to women but it does not belong to the popular genre of feminist writing. Equality of the sexes which is frequently observed as the hallmark of the tribal culture is reflected in the narrative art of *Aador* as well. No less impressive is the unconscious suspension of a dominant narrator allowing thereby spaces for continual polyphony of voices, voices of men and women, who struggle for articulation. Innumerable characters come and go from the stage when their part is over. They tell their own stories. The narrator does not interfere in the least because s/he is one of the many. Richness of detail of the flora and the fauna, unhindered documentation of the customs and traditions of various displaced tribes and inter-tribal relations no less than the presence of awe-inspiring evil of death, disease and exploitation by the ‘other’, offer a slice of life against which we are forced to judge ourselves.

Shobha Pawar  
Pune  
January 2013

## The Epidemic

He was a wage earner who used to work in the forest. Whenever there was a fire in the forest he would climb the tree and beat the drum. As far as I can remember, in those times the adivasis were afraid of entering the forest; more from fear of the revenue department than of the wild animals! The adivasis in those days dressed sparsely—only a loin cloth, rarely supplemented by a khadi vest.

Though most of them stayed away from the forest, Aatya enjoyed the privilege of having a lot of fun in the jungle, feasting on *payar*, *peeper* and *umber*. Well equipped with a catapult and enough stock of pebbles, he would perch himself up on the tree, hiding himself among the leaves. When the birds came to pick fruit, he never missed the shot. One after the other they fell to the ground and Aatya walked back home in pride, with a bunch of them on his shoulder.

Pandya, Aatya's father, worked in the forest before he fell ill. He suffered a deep wound in the leg due to a snake-bite. His leg started rotting from the foot upward. He could not walk. A fellow villager guarded the forest then. People in the village paid him his wages. The officers of the revenue department often took him with them on rounds.

One day Ganpat came to see Pandya. And asked him, 'Where have you been all these days? Haven't seen you for a long time!'

'Do you think those sentries would let me stay at home?' said Pandya. 'They force me to ramble with them in the forest the whole day. Besides, I have to beat the drum as usual. Once I went to the moor at Godadya while on a drumming duty. I happened to step on a serpent killed by some wild animal. I do not know if it was the serpent's bone, but it penetrated deep into my leg and yet I could not find it. It remains a mystery, but the fact is I have almost lost a leg,' he said.

'Don't talk like that, my dear friend, the whole leg is rotting. I

have come to share with you some news,' Ganpat consoled him.

'What is left for me to do now? I have lost my leg.'

'Come on Pandya! There is a great rush in the village to see Salabai, let us go and see her.'

'How can I come with you? I have not been able to walk since the day I met with this accident. Aatya goes to the jungle now.'

'Don't tell me. I will bring the bullock-cart and you are coming with me. Now no excuse! Get ready!' Ganpat coaxed him.

'What shall I say to the sentries? They come and harass me everyday. They force me to go from door to door and call people. They have no sympathy even for the children.'

'Are you coming or not? "Yes" or "no"?' Ganpat tried to persuade him.

Pandya replied, 'In my house, they don't observe any *vratas*. We are defiled and unfit for a visit to Salabai. Aatya shoots birds every day, brings them home and we eat.'

'Pandyababa, there is still time. People have been visiting Salabai for quite a few days. Tell your wife to perform daily prayers after taking bath.'

'Not me, Ganpat! But, who is Salabai? A woman?'

'No! She is a goddess, they say. That is why people are thronging in large numbers.'

'Then we shall come. If she cures my leg, I will offer her seven coconuts.'

'Exactly! People are saying that the goddess has arrived to cure ailing people.' Ganpat tried to convince him.

'Ganpat, we will not eat meat from today. But how can I persuade Aatya to stop? He shoots birds and brings them home everyday.'

'Ask him to cook it in the forest and eat it there.'

'I know people are tired of the daily torture. The sentries make them sit in the sun for hours; hungry and weary. What a misfortune! Times have changed. Look at our forefathers. They had a gala time. Then came the white man and everything changed for us. I remember Aaba saying that he had never seen them in his life. But they beat me like a beast once.'

'Why? Why did they beat you?'

'I don't know. Once I was walking ahead of them in the forest with my drum. As they walked behind me, one of them spotted my



loincloth and kicked me on my bottom. Up went the drum and down I went, flat on my knees. I scrambled to my feet as he held me by the loincloth. On discovering the tobacco I had hidden at one end of my loincloth, he started beating me. 'Why do you carry tobacco in the forest? You must be setting trees on fire, I am sure,' he snapped at me. I tried my best to prove my innocence by telling them that I use it as medicine when the flies bite my legs. I soak it in water and apply it to my legs while rambling in the jungle. Only then did he stop hitting me. Aatya understands them better, I think. He does everything that they want him to do. "Pandya, your son is clever. He runs at our bidding and serves the jungle well," they drop in sometimes to tell me. By the way, do we have to carry our food, Ganpat?' Pandya's curiosity was roused.

'Of course, we must! Who is going to offer us meals there?' Ganpat was better informed.

'I am damn tired. The officers come to my place everyday. They send me on a thousand errands. "Go and fetch this fellow", they say, or "Tell us the names of those who drink liquor", they shout. "Tell us about their hideouts where they make wine", they whine. They pester me with a hundred such questions. Women and children are so scared of them that they don't even go out to pee. Kids empty the bowels within the house itself when the officers are around,' Pandya grumbled.

An epidemic hit the village. Kind of influenza, they said. Everyday the death toll increased at a quicker pace. Though people took precautions with the domestic sewage, death hounded them. At the break of day, Ganpat beat the drum to tell the people to assemble under the mahua tree in the yard of the village chief.

People crowded under the tree. Dipya, the *bhagat*, was the village chief. He was a powerful man; dark skinned, with a snub nose, plump and dressed in a loincloth round his waist and a piece of torn dhoti around his head. When people spotted him from a distance they would say, 'Look! There goes the buffalo!'

Dipya addressed the mob: 'Listen to me. People in the village will go to pay their homage with obeisance to Salabai. But our women folk don't observe any *vrata*. They are not careful about the disposal

of waste. That is why people are dying in the village. Women must take a daily bath and worship Salabai regularly. They must use boiled water for preparing rotis. They must not abuse anyone. If they fail to do what I say, they will have to face an ordeal. They will gather here and each one of them will be called to throw a pebble in the water. If the pebble floats, the woman will be punished. I will put chilli powder in the woman's eyes and hang her upside down on this mahua tree.'

Men returned home to tell their wives what they should do. Dipya came to Pandya's house. He had brought a sacred thread for Pandya. Chanting mantras, he tied the thread around Pandya's leg.

'Will my leg be all right, Aaba?' Pandya asked with earnestness.

'Take it easy. Let me try this thread first. Good if it works. Otherwise, I will have to consult the spirit. What thorn was it? Why don't you remove it?'

'Not that simple! I had been to the moor of Godadya. I happened to step on a serpent there.'

Biju, Pandya's wife, had finished fetching water from the well. She was tall, with a straight, sharp nose, slightly dark, a string of white stone beads adorned her neck. She wore a blue blouse and bright yellow sari stretched up above the knees. 'Tanya is dead and the whole house is crying.' She informed them.

Leaning on his staff, Dipya went to Tanya's house. Women and children were beating their chests and crying. Dipya warned them not to spread the news in the village. He then called Vanya, Tanya's brother.

'Vanya, tell *Babi* not to cry. People are dying everyday. The night passes but it's difficult to pass the day. No one comes to bury the dead. Come on, let us make the preparations.'

'But who will come? Everyone is scared and they have locked themselves in the house. No one is ready to risk one's life. Aaba, we are only two. How can we carry him?'

'Vanya, don't you worry. We will manage. Bring the bullocks. Let us spread the dry sticks criss-cross across the plough and lay him upon it. We will carry him.'

'What about the shroud? There is no new sheet to wrap him in.'

'Forget it. What's the use when one lies dead? Only termites will feast on it.'

Vanya brought the plough and arranged the sticks to make a kind of bed. They laid the dead body upon it and fastened it with a rope. Just then Ganpat came running and said to Dipya, 'The officers have come and they want to see you.'

Heaving a sigh, Dipya said to Vanya, 'Leave it. I must be going now.'

Dipya came home and greeted them all. An officer got up and asked him, 'Where have you been?'

'Dada, my cousin died, so I went to see him,' Dipya spoke modestly.

'Go to the village and call them all. I want to check if anyone has gone to the forest. They often go there to steal firewood or make wine, I know. Call them all.' The officer ordered.

Dipya called Aatya. Finishing his lunch, Aatya started off with the drum. 'Hey, Jangalya has gone to the forest to make wine; I have sent Ganpat to fetch him. Come with me, we will call the villagers,' Dipya coaxed Aatya.

'No Aaba, I won't come. I am scared of the officers; if they see me they will beat me for sure. Aaba's leg is damaged. I have to beat the drum now.'

Dipya went to the village and made the announcement, 'Listen to me. The officers from the revenue department have come. You must come to see him. Come to my place and bring your wives and children, too.'

Dipya's voice went ringing in the village to convey the officer's order. He then went to Vanya's place. The dead body awaited burial. 'Vanya, we will keep the corpse in the house. Otherwise, the dogs will nibble at the body. When the officers leave the village, we will bury him in the yard. Come bring Babi and the children too. The officer has warned.'

'Oh, no! How can Babi come? You know it is only a few days since she delivered the child. She is too weak to walk. The last she ate was yesterday and there is nothing more to eat.'

'You must bring her. I won't listen to you. Give her a hand. But walk she must.'

Vanya went in to give Dipya's message to Shimgi. She groaned in pain as she tried to convince him, 'Look at me. My stomach is aching. Hold the baby please. I will wrap this piece of cloth around my waist.'

Shimgi, fair and slender, with a snub nose, simply skin and bones, could hardly stand. She got up and leaning against the wall, wrapped her waist with a piece of cloth. She loosened the knot of her garment and set out to follow Vanya, limping, somehow managing to walk with a stick.

People had already crowded the place when they reached Dipya's house. Women sat away from the men. The horses drew their attention and there was a whisper among them. Irritated by the sound, the officer shouted, 'The woman whose husband has gone to the forest to make wine, will be put into jail.'

Dipya announced the names one after another and the *saheb* noted them down. There were only ten. Saheb wondered at the number and asked, 'Are there only ten in the village? The village is too well-known to have such a small number of families.'

'Dada, most of them live on their farms. Only ten of us live here together,' Dipya explained.

'Now all of you will escort us to the main road,' the officer ordered.

In the meantime, Dipya called them all to the house and whispered to them in a low tone, 'Vanya, all of you should go and bury Tanya in the yard. Aatya and Damu will come with me to see the officer off.'

Dipya went with the officer. Vanya came home with the rest of them. He unleashed the bullocks and started digging the ground. Motya scooped up the soil. In a short while Dipya returned with the other two. Now they wanted to lay Tanya to rest. As they lifted the corpse, they noticed that the lip of the corpse was eaten by dogs. His eyes were bleeding; only the sockets remained! The dogs had dug their nails deep into his eyes. 'You could have taken care of Tanya,' Dipya said to Vanya.

'How could I? In a house without a door, what else can you expect? How can you keep the dogs away? Let us bury him. It's only a matter of having space enough to lie down. So many are dying, they say. I don't know what the arrival of Salabai portends. Has she come to relieve us of pain or overload us with disease? Everyone is dying of flue. Girls offer their prayers after bathing daily but it is of no use. People have nothing to eat. Girls go to the forest to pick payar, peeper and umber for kids but now there are no more chances of obtaining these. With the presence of the officers, how can they pick *kasur*

now?’ Vanya expressed his helplessness.

They all went home. Vanya made porridge of umber flour left in the house. He and Shingi had to make do with that. He sat down and pondered. Shingi lay down and asked him not to worry too much.

‘Try to sleep though it is too late. The cock will crow before long,’ she said.

‘Don’t bother. What shall we eat tomorrow? They are spying on us. We cannot go to the forest to pick kasur. If they see us they will beat us like beasts. How happy we were before they came! We used to have heaps of kasur in the house; more than what we required. Our granary used to be full with payar, peeper and kasur. And we had a choice too.’ Vanya reflected.

Dipya was limping when he came to Pandya. ‘How is your leg? Did you remove the thorn?’ he asked. Pandya was in tears. Dipya lifted his leg, shook off the tobacco with which the wound was covered and pressed the leg forcefully and what a surprise! Out came the thorn! Dipya passed on the thorn to Pandya whose lips parted in a smile, as tears rolled down his cheeks. ‘I am feeling better now. I will go with Ganpat to the fair to see Salabai.’ He was excited. ‘Aatya’s *Mai*, look here, uncle has removed the thorn. Sharp and white!’ he said to his wife.

‘You cried day and night. Tell that snub-nosed to be careful and watch his step. Uncle, why have the officers come?’ she asked.

‘Babi, they are men from the government office. They rule over us. They are everywhere. They are sent to guard the forest, to stop any illicit wine production and catch pilferers who ransack the forest.’ Dipya explained.

‘Thank god, we could hide our stock of mahua.’

‘How did you, Babi?’

‘Underground!’

‘I can’t understand.’

‘Aatya told me that the officers would take away the stock of mahua we had gathered. So we made a hole in the house, deep enough to cover the stock and buried all the sacks. Then we patched up the floor.’

‘Pandya, your son is smart.’

‘Uncle, he acts at his will. This year he cut the grass that covered the entire field, loaded the sheaves on a rented cart and took it to the market, all by himself.’

‘Pandya, your son is a hard worker. Give him a small piece of barren land and he will do his best. Send him to me this year. Why don’t you get your sowing done with a plough?’

‘It was nice of you to offer a piece of land. But I have no bullocks.’

‘So, what do you say Pandya? Are you coming or not?’

‘Yes, we will go. I will go to the market tomorrow, buy a sari and blouse for Biju and we will set out the day after. By the way, how far is it?’

‘We have to cross the Tapi, they say. Let us follow them.’

The next morning Pandya went to Pimpalner. He went straight to Bhiku’s shop. The tailor showed him a few saris. Pandya chose the green one.

‘Do you like it? It is expensive. There is a silver thread in it. Five rupees!’

Pandya paid eight annas for a piece of material for the blouse in addition. Drinking a glass of water he went to Ganpat’s place. Ganpat was threshing the *kulith* on the farm, he was told.

‘Uncle, tell me when you are going. We will also join you. We will carry our own lunch.’ Pandya was thinking of Salabai now.

‘You don’t need to carry food. Take flour only. After *darshan*, we will come back. We will carry enough to last for a day. No salt and pepper till we return. We will go the day after, tell your wife. We will have harvested our *kulith* by then.’

When Aatya returned from the forest, he said to Pandya, ‘I am not going to the forest in the morning. I will go with you to the fair.’

The next day the village surveyor came to see Dipya. ‘Tell me the names of those who bought land this year. They have not paid the tax,’ he said to Dipya.

‘I paid the amount only last month.’

‘How much did you pay?’

‘Fifteen rupees for the three farms!’

‘That was for the purchase of land. Now the annual tax is due. One rupee and a quarter for the first, three quarters of a rupee for the second and one and half rupees for the third! If you fail to pay the tax, the farms will be sold in auction.’

‘Ganpat, go and fetch Pandya. Tell him that the surveyor has come and ask him to bring some money.’ Dipya instructed Ganpat.

The surveyor was checking the records when Pandya arrived with Ganpat.

‘Who is Pandya Reshma?’ he asked.

‘Dada, it’s me. I had been to the forest. I am just returning from the forest.’

‘Why did you go to the forest?’

‘Dada, I work as a labourer.’

‘How much do they pay you?’

‘Nothing! My father also used to do the same job.’

‘How do you manage to live?’

‘Dada, no one goes to the forest now as the government officers have come. We stay at home and eat payar, peeper and umbar; what else?’

‘Why did you buy the land then?’

‘Dada, I have a son. I must leave something for him. He will cultivate it.’

‘You must pay the tax then. You can’t have the land free of cost.’

‘I have no money to give you.’

‘Let me put one of your farms up for auction then.’

Pandya moved closer to Dipya and whispered in his ears, ‘How much does he want?’

‘He wants one rupee and a quarter for one, three quarters of a rupee for the other and one and half rupees for the third.’

‘Take this uncle. This is all I have. Count it.’

‘It makes only two. We need one and half rupees more.’

‘Uncle, you will make up for the remaining amount. Aatya will till your land and repay your money.’

‘I have to pay for my own farms too. Why don’t you go to the village and borrow from somebody?’

Pandya went to the village but returned empty handed. Dipya then asked him to go home. Finally, he paid the dues for Pandya and the surveyor rode back. Next day when Pandya visited Dipya, he found him lying in bed.

‘Uncle, when are we leaving?’ asked Pandya.

‘I am having fever since last night. You can go if you want.’

Pandya went to Ganpat and told him to get ready to leave for the

fair the next morning.

As the rooster sounded its bugle early in the morning, Pandya went to call Ganpat. Dipya was groaning in pain. Ganpat and Pandya set the bullock-cart on wheels and they made for Salabai. Biju and Sunita too joined them. By the time they arrived at Sawarpada, it was night. Pandya instructed Ganpat to slow down.

‘Mavlya always goes fast once he catches momentum. It is difficult to control him,’ said Ganpat.

‘Hold the reins so that the other can keep pace with him.’

As they arrived on the banks of the river Ambada, Ganpat pulled the reins tightly. The next minute Mavlya slipped his foot and fell. Consequently, Ganpat was thrown into the river, followed by Pandya, Biju and Sunita. Ganpat’s face hit against a big stone and blood trickled down his cheeks. Without bothering, he got to his feet and pulled the reins. Mavlya bellowed in pain. The side of the cart had hit Biju in the chest. Pressing her chest with one hand she got to her feet. Sunita lay still, holding her child fast to her chest. She suffered a head injury and bled profusely. Horrified by the sight, Pandya said to Ganpat, ‘Leave the bullock and attend to your wife first.’

Sunita recovered her consciousness a little later. She looked around and shouted, ‘Where is my child? Where have you thrown him?’ Blood trickled down her head onto her green blouse. A bluish scar on her knee was clearly visible.

The sun rose. Mavlya lay listless, groaning. Handing over the baby boy to Sunita, Ganpat turned to Mavlya. Holding his tail, he tried to help him stand. However, the wound in the foot was deeper than he could imagine. The foot could not touch the ground. As Ganpat held his palm underneath the foot, it went right inside the hollow of the wound. Mavlya could stand up groggily on three feet only and that too with great effort. Holding out his palm—smeared with blood—to Pandya, Ganpat said, ‘What to do? How will Mavlya walk?’

‘I will go back to the village and ask Jeram for another bull. I will tell Govindya to look after Mavlya,’ suggested Pandya. Leaving Mavlya in the custody of Govindya, Pandya came back with Jeram’s black bull. They put the bull to the cart and as they drove, the black bull ran faster than ever, so much so, that the women were scared



and shouted in fear. Ganpat too handed over the charge to Pandya.

A lapwing flitted across, screeching 'ti...di...di' as they approached the village, Gunjal. This was certainly not an auspicious sign. Ganpat was scared. Before he responded, Pandya shouted, 'I will not spare her if something untoward happens. I will shoot and roast her to fill my belly.' No sooner had he said this than the cart toppled down into a pit. Within seconds, one of the wheels came apart.

'Did I not tell you that it was an ill omen? The bird's cry, I mean.' Ganpat reiterated with greater confidence.

'Let's go home, Ganpat. Something is wrong. We will repair the cart temporarily and keep it with uncle's brother.' Pandya was reluctant to continue the journey now.

They took the bullock-cart back to the village and asked a man in the street where Dipya's brother stayed. 'His name is Supadya and you will find him at home,' said the man. 'There are two more deaths in the village,' he did not forget to add. When they reached Supadya's place, his daughter informed them that he had gone to the house of the dead man. They left the cart there, returned the black bull to Jeram and went back to their homes.

Ganpat and Sunita came home. Thinking that Dipya must have fallen asleep, they waited for some time. Now Ganpat called him but there was no response. He shook him but his body was cold. He rushed to Pandya who was having his meal. Pandya invited him to join for dinner but Ganpat was in tears. 'Aaba is not waking up' he sobbed as he talked. Pandya pushed aside his plate and went with Ganpat. He opened Dipya's mouth and concluded, 'He is no more! Get ready to bury him. No one will come. We will put him on the plough and take him to the farm for burial.' Biju came a little later. Sunita sat crying and hitting her forehead. Biju too could not hide her grief as she tried to console her. 'Why uncle? You sent us to the fair so that you would end your life like this?' Biju wept.

A strange silence prevailed in the village. Fear of death would not allow the village people to leave their homes. None came. Finally, Ganpat and Pandya lifted Dipya's body to lay it across the plough and carried him to the farm and buried him. They went to the river and took bath. Next they made a small toy farm in the sand, as was the custom and sowed rice, maize, chilly, dal and groundnuts. Watering the seeds, they prayed to the departed soul, 'Uncle, you will

have enough to eat when the crop is ready and yet be able to leave something for us too.'

When Ganpat and Pandya returned, Sunita and Biju went to the river. On their way, they went on scattering the seeds and repeated the ritual after taking a bath. They made a ring of straw and wore it on the finger. They also prayed to the departed soul, requesting him to leave enough food grains for them. When they returned they found Pandya consoling Ganpat, telling him not to cry over his father's death and to cook and eat something. Soon after Pandya and Biju returned, Aatya came home from the forest. When he heard about Dipya's death, he did not feel like going to the forest and said so to his mother. 'I am not going to the forest.'

'You must go. I am feeling a bit feverish,' Pandya said to him. After having his lunch Aatya went to the forest. Pandya pulled over a rug of rough wool and lay down. Biju got back to cooking. She made gruel of rice and woke him up. His body ached as fever shot up. Taking only a little gruel, he said to his wife, 'I don't think I will live. Perhaps, I am on my way to death, following our uncle Dipya.'

'Don't say that again. Think of me. What can a woman do? Our son is not mature enough to take any responsibility.' She sounded worried.

'He is no longer a child. Big enough to take a wife!' Pandya tried to brush away her fear.

He drank a little gruel she had made and went back to bed.

A little later, Aatya came home with a bunch of birds and asked his mother to cook them. She had not made any rotis today and told him that his father had had only a little gruel. But Aatya did not want to drink the same. Irritated by his stubbornness, Biju took him to task, 'Does anyone eat rotis when somebody dies? It hurts the skin of the dead if you do, they say.'

Aatya had to make do with the gruel and the roasted birds.

The cock crowed and Pandya called his wife, 'Biju, make fire for me.' She got up and made fire. Then she asked him to come over. He could not walk. She helped him to the fireplace. Warming himself long enough, he called Aatya, 'Don't pester your mother anymore.' These were the last words he spoke and breathed his last within seconds. Biju and Aatya cried their heart out. As the day dawned, Aatya went out to break the news to Ganpat. Sunita was sweeping

the house when Ganpat told her that he was leaving with Aatya. He also asked her to pack some eatables. Sunita had rice, chilly, maize and groundnuts to give and taking these, Ganpat left for Pandya's place.

When he arrived, he found Biju crying and rolling over the dead body. Ganpat took her to task. 'Why are you crying? People are dying in the village everyday. There are too many deaths to cry over. Too many dead bodies to throw away!' He turned to Aatya and asked him to prepare the makeshift hearse. Pandya's body, fastened with a rope to the plough, was being carried to its final destination now. Biju came out running to see her husband for the last time and threw herself on the corpse. Ganpat forced her to go away and she lay on the ground. Aatya drove the cart in the direction of the cemetery. But Ganpat thought differently.

'Turn the cart towards the farm,' he said to Aatya, 'He died before he could consume the grains from the farm. Let us bury him on the farm.'

After the burial, instead of going to the river, Aatya coaxed Ganpat to come home with him. He was doubtful whether his mother had gone home or not. When he saw the green sari from a distance, he left the cart to Ganpat and rushed to the spot. As he approached the ground he told himself that his mother couldn't leave him like that. 'Green is the colour of life; how can she die?' he said to himself. 'Wake up Mai', he said in earnest. To his dismay, his mother lay still, in the same condition as they had left her before proceeding for the burial. Stretching his hand underneath her back, he heaved her up on the ground. Water dripped from her mouth and he cried in agony, 'Uncle, Mai has left me alone and has made for her heavenly abode with Aaba.' No one could console Aatya.

Ganpat came to help. He put Biju on the same cart. She was dressed in green, the sari that Pandya had bought for her. 'Everything is over,' pondered Aatya. His eyes were misty as he looked at Ganpat. For a minute Ganpat thought that Aatya would insist on a new sari for his dead mother. Before he said anything, Ganpat dismissed the idea saying, 'Let us not bother about a new garment for the dead. So many people are dying without them. They dump the bodies immediately.'

The gruesome fact was that a strange hush prevailed in the village.

The dead were left to their fate and those who survived shut themselves up in their huts thinking that they were shutting death out.

As Aatya recovered from the shock of the two deaths in the house, he asked Ganpat if he wanted to eat something. But Ganpat asked him to hurry with the burial as the sun was setting in the west. 'Shall we take her to the cemetery?' Aatya asked him. Ganpat thought it wise to bury Biju by her husband's side. After performing the last rites, the two walked back home. On the way Aatya wondered about the rising death toll in the village.

'People are dying in the neighbouring village of Pimpalner too. The rumour that Salabai has brought epidemic to the village is widespread. They don't touch the food in the house where there has been a death. Bhika reported to me. Every house is enveloped in silence,' said Ganpat.

'The sentries too have disappeared,' added Aatya.

'Pack your belongings, sell your house and come to stay with me,' suggested Ganpat. Aatya had not much of a choice. He shut the door by pushing a boulder against it and with a staff and a rough rug walked off to Ganpat's house.

'Where had you been all this time? You left in the morning and look, it is evening now.' Sunita questioned as soon as the two arrived home.

'You will not believe if I say that Biju passed away a little after we buried Pandya. We buried her too and I have brought Aatya to stay with us. Poor child! What will he do after the sudden loss of both his parents?' Ganpat was all sympathy for him. 'Bring the wine. I know half the bottle is still there,' he said to Sunita.

'Go and fetch it yourself. It was buried in the backyard. I must get back to cooking.'

'Aatya, go and bring the bottle. Let us drink before the sentries come.'

'It would have been better if there had been something to munch along with the drink,' thought Sunita. Ganpat asked her to roast some yellow grams first and cook the rice later. They relaxed over wine and roasted grams.

Ganpat had a son, the only one, who had a habit of eating soil. As he grew up he looked lean and thin, a weakling; a rickety child

with a drum-like belly and thin hands and feet. There was swelling on his face now.

‘Sunita, I don’t think our son can survive for long. His days are numbered. Now Aatya will be our son. Be a mother to him and take care of him. I will go to Pimpalner tomorrow to buy a pair of bulls. We will need two ploughs this year.’ He spoke with concern. He did not forget to tell Aatya to make himself comfortable and not to worry about anything.

Ganpat left for Pimpalner and directly went to see Bhika. He requested him to lend a bull and assured to pay rent too.

‘I have eight of them and I need only four this year.’ Bhika responded positively.

They went to the cowshed and Bhika unleashed one to hand over to Ganpat. ‘Take this, Ganpat. I would not have parted with this for another man. You are Dipya’s son and our business relations have been maintained over years. That is why I am giving this bull to you.’

When Ganpat came home with the bull, he found Sunita crying. Unable to guess the reason of her distress, he shouted at her, ‘Why on earth are you crying?’ It was Ganpat’s turn to be shocked. Jagnya, their only son, was dead. He called Aatya who had gone to the farm and the two gave a burial to the young boy, next to Dipya.

The epidemic continued to take its toll for over two and half months. Ganpat had to stop work on the farm for some time.

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## The Memorial

The New Year came with a cool breeze. People got back to work. Women also got busy clearing the ground, burning dead leaves and garbage. It was time to get the beds ready for sowing chilli. They inspired Aatya and Ganpat to contribute their share of work. Sunita instructed the two to get the soil ready with natural fertilizer and keep the seeds of *nagli* and kulith ready.

The new bull that Ganpat had brought did not work. Aatya tried his best by yoking it to the plough. But to no avail! The bull freed itself by sticking its neck out from the other side. Aatya was fretting now. He tried to push its neck back under the shaft. Consequently, the bull was hurt and started bleeding. Aatya was never comfortable with farm work. He preferred to wander in the forest. 'Bastard, now get going or I will beat you,' he shouted at the bull. 'Are the sentries dead? May god send them soon so that I can get rid of this tiring job,' he prayed. 'Better to guard the forest! Nothing like wandering wherever you want to; and feasting on peeper, payar or hunting birds!' he imagined.

Finally, Aatya somehow managed to drive the bull to the threshing ground in the field. Then he went home and asked Sunita to tell Ganpat to either return the bull or exchange it. He went back to the farm. Ganpat arrived soon. On seeing him, Aatya started wiping the blood on the bull's neck with dust.

'Uncle, by the time I brought him home, the crows had pecked deep into the wound,' he said apologetically.

'Can he walk?' asked Ganpat.

'Better exchange it tomorrow.'

'You say the crows pecked at the wound; but look here, there are scars on the body and his face is swollen too.'

Aatya sat on the ground with his head down and fingers making lines in the dust. Ganpat asked him to feed the bull and went home.

When Aatya took a basket of hay to the bull, he saw that its neck was drooping and saliva dripped from its mouth. He too went back home and asked Sunita to give him his mother's sari since it was too cold to do with one blanket. He returned to the farm only to find that the bull was swollen all over.

In fear, Aatya ran away to his maternal uncle's house at Savarpada. Pulling over the sari and the blanket he sat in his uncle's yard silently in the darkness of the night. Just then Supa, Govinda's wife, came out to go for toilet in the open. As soon as she saw the 'black bundle' in the darkness she screamed in fear, 'Govindya, come out and see what animal is here. It will gobble me.' Govinda rushed out with an axe. Before he could raise his hand, Aatya shouted, 'Uncle, it's me. Thinking you must be asleep I preferred to sit here quietly.' Awestruck, Govinda embraced Aatya and started crying. 'Good, you spoke. Otherwise I would have sent you to the heavenly abode with your father and mother. Come in, my child.' He asked his wife to give him the left over food to eat. However, there was hardly anything in the house. 'Have the children ever left anything behind?' Supa asked. Promising to cook early in the morning, she asked them to go to bed.

Aatya now stayed with his maternal uncle. Govinda did not have any land of his own. He worked on others' farms on daily wages. He looked after their cattle too.

Supa made porridge of kasur for Govinda and Aatya in the morning. After breakfast, the two took the village cattle and sheep to the forest for grazing. Govinda asked Aatya to take Jayram's cows to his house.

'Who are you?' Jayram asked Aatya. 'Where do you stay?'

'I am Biju's son, staying at my uncle's place.' answered Aatya.

'Go and send your uncle,' Jayram spoke encouragingly.

Aatya instantly went back to fetch his uncle who was unable to guess the reason. Jayram had an excellent offer. 'Send this boy to work in my house. He will look after my cattle so that my cows will be better taken care of. In the crowd of the village cattle, sometimes they get hurt or are neglected. I will have a separate cowboy to look after mine. They will be healthier then.'

'What do you say Aatya? Will you stay at Aaba's house?' asked Govinda.

'I will, uncle. What will I do at home? You have too many to look after. There is nothing to eat. Let me fend for myself. I can work in anybody's house.'

'Govindya, let him take care of my cattle. After five years of work, I will give him a goat. He will stay with us and start his work from today,' proposed Jayram.

'Aaba, I will go home and come back with my blanket.'

'What? Did you not carry it when you took the cattle for grazing? Did you go to the forest without the woollen rug?'

'Not really! I made a cover of teak leaves to use in the forest. It saves my rug from getting wet so that I can use it at night.'

While Govinda turned to roasting the rabbit he had hunted, Aatya asked Supa to hand him over his rug and his mother's sari. He was thinking of leaving for Jayram's place the same day.

'Where are you going? Ask your uncle first,' she said to him.

'May I go, uncle?'

'Are you in your senses? It's too late now. It is already dark. You can go tomorrow.'

Govinda boiled the tender meat of the rabbit in water. Supa made rotis of umber flour, grinding it fresh. The three sat down for dinner.

'Aunt, I am having this roti for the first time since mother passed away! It tastes better with meat without salt and chilly; not so with spicy mutton.' Aatya sounded a bit sentimental for a minute.

As the sky turned pink at dawn, the uncle and nephew set out in the direction of the village. 'I will come home for lunch,' said Aatya as they walked along the road. 'They are far too rich. We are poor. I would feel awkward eating with them.' Aatya explained to his uncle. 'What a big house as compared to ours! Yet there is hardly any vacant space. The storeroom is packed to the roof with piles of sacks full of foodgrains and we are so short of it at home. Please tell him to pay me cash for my work.' Aatya felt he had convinced his uncle now.

'Start your work first. When you complete a year, we will ask for it. How can you dictate terms at the beginning?' Uncle sounded reasonable.

When Aatya reached Jayram's house the sun was brighter. 'You said you would be back in minutes. Now take the cows for grazing; it's already late.' With these words Jayram instructed Aatya to go to the pasture in his farm. He warned him not to go to the forest for



fear of the sentries.

Aatya would cover his head with teak leaves and follow his flock the whole day. He used to carry his roti, wrapped in a piece of cloth, which Kuvvari, Jayram's wife, made for him. When he returned from the farm in the evening, she made him share the housework. She was childless. She worked on the farm for the whole day and did all the housework on return. Once she did not realise when the sun set and rushed back home hurriedly. She walked in the enveloping darkness. Just then it started raining. She hurriedly tried to climb down the hill. The rough blanket on her head got stuck in the tree and she stumbled upon the rocks. Her hand was seriously injured. She walked home, crying in unbearable pain. She was a few yards away when Aatya heard someone crying. He felt worried about her and called his master. Jayram asked him to go and look for her. 'She should have been home by now. I know she is greedy and must be picking vegetables. She will never be satisfied,' commented Jayram. He asked Aatya to light the fire before he left.

Aatya met Kuvvari on the way. He was moved to hear her story. He offered to help her. He peeled the stalks of *palash* and *dhupali* and the two came home. He helped her squat on the ground resting against the wall. She moaned in pain. Now it was Jayram's turn to be scared. 'Go and call Dajiba. We will have to brace the hand with sticks and bind it. She will not work now; she will make others run. An impossible woman! We have sacks of gram in the house but she will run after vegetables.' He was irritated.

'You are right. How can one find vegetables in this season? They grow only in the rainy season,' Aatya sided with Jayram.

When Dajiba arrived he informed Jayram that Kuvvari had a fracture. He dressed the wound with the peels and braced it. He also prescribed herbal medicine to be given with raw eggs. That was the only way to save her hand, he said. When Dajiba left, Jayram asked Aatya if he could cook. There was no other alternative. He was made to cook even when he stayed with Ganpat; that is why he had run away and come to live with Govinda, his maternal uncle. Now he was to face the same ordeal once more. Aatya knew cooking and within a short time the meal was ready. Jayram had his bellyful first and then the two of them took the plate to Kuvvari. However, Kuvvari could use neither of her hands. Jayram abused her as he fed her with

his hands.

For more than two months, Aatya fought on both fronts. He worked day and night. Yet, there were no signs of Kuvari's recovery. One day Jayram said to his wife, 'I feel sorry for Aatya. Poor boy! He has been working endlessly. Let us find a girl for him so that...'

'Never! How can you hand over the charge of my house to a stranger? If at all we need a hand, my nephews are there to help us out. I will bring them here. I don't trust strangers; they are always ungrateful.' Kuvari dismissed the proposal instantly.

'You may be right,' continued Jayram, still not ready to give up. 'But I don't think Aatya is the ungrateful kind. If we get him married, he will not leave us. His father has left a farm behind. It is new and I am sure, the yield will be fantastic. Our farms are old and have washed out.'

One day when Aatya was around, Kuvari said to Jayram, 'His maternal uncle has three daughters and soon there will be an addition to the family. How can they feed so many mouths? They have neither farm nor any other source of income. Why not ask for one of the daughters?' With these words she looked at Aatya expectantly.

'True,' nodded Aatya. 'It is difficult to manage but my aunt goes out picking kasur and umber and tries to make both ends meet.'

'How can they make do with umber alone? Moreover, your tummy gets upset if you eat even a handful. You lose your taste for anything more.' Kuvari could not imagine the ordeal.

'Not the raw fruit really! She will chop it, leave it to dry and grind it so that she can make rotis of the flour. My mother also did the same. Kaki, our farm is quite big but we don't have cattle. It is difficult to cultivate land without cattle. Ganpat uncle must be looking after our farm now,' said Aatya.

'Don't you worry, we will find a girl for you and then we will look after your farm too.'

Jayram rushed to coax Aatya.

After visiting Ganpat's house, when Jayram returned home he looked relaxed.

'They are ready to give their daughter's hand in marriage to Aatya and that too without asking for any dowry since Aatya is their own close relation. The girl had gone to her aunt's house and Govinda promised to go and fetch her from Karanji the next day. It was kind

of him not to ask for dowry but we will give him a bag of food grains. After all, it must have cost them something to bring up their daughter. Only parents know what it means to bring up children,' he said to Kuvari.

'Why should we?' retorted Kuvari. 'This is against the custom. Has anybody ever given food grains to a bride's father? There have been so many weddings in the village but no one has ever given anything of the kind to a girl's father.' Kuvari did not approve of Jayram's idea.

'Try to understand. In these times of drought people are selling their daughters for survival. Here, we are sitting idle making him work for us. But for his timely help you could not have done anything. Who would have taken care of our house? How selfish you are!' Jayram tried his best to convince Kuvari.

When Isari returned from her aunt's house, Jayram went to see Govinda.

'What does Isari think? Tell me if she is ready to marry Aatya. Otherwise I will look for another girl. We need someone to look after us all.' Jayram would not beat about the bush.

'That is not necessary. Why should she refuse? She will starve here. And Aatya is my sister's son. Poor boy! Left alone without a mother and a father! So what? He too will have his day. She shall marry him and take care of everyone.' Govinda assured him.

On return, Jayram told Kuvari that the girl was good looking. However, he was not sure if she was good at work too. 'Girls from poor families are hard workers but those from the rich are idle and work shirkers,' he reflected.

In the evening Jayram took Aatya to Govinda's house. His wife served hot umber rotis for dinner. Later, when they relaxed by the fire talking to each other, Jayram said, 'Never in my life have I eaten such tasty umber roti. My mother never made it. I remember once when she cooked kulith, my father threw away the stuff in anger.'

Supa tore a sari and gave the two pieces to Isari and the three finally came back to Jayram's house. From the next day Aatya and Isari started working at Jayram's house.

Time passed. In the third year, however, Kuvari started grumbling, finding fault either with Aatya or Isari, by turns. She could find a hundred excuses for blaming them. She even pestered her husband

for a son, at this age. She seemed to be acting on somebody's prompting. She went to a midwife for a massage. When her behaviour became unbearable, Jayram said to Aatya, 'Go and invite your father-in-law. I have failed to keep my word. I owe him a bag of rice.' When Govinda came, Jayram took a basketful of rice. He went out to call him. In that short interval of time Kuvvari replaced rice with kulith. She nagged Jayram for being so generous. Jayram was helpless. Govinda took the kulith, packed it in a piece of cloth and went home. On his way the contents scattered as there were holes in the cloth bag. When Govinda reached home he said to his wife, Supa, 'How can people accept dowry for a daughter? Look, I came scattering everything I was given on the road.' He smiled as he said this.

It was the fourth year of their marriage now. Ganpat now frequently came to Jayram's house and tried to set Kuvvari against Aatya. In a fit of anger, Kuvvari left home and went to Gunjal. Jayram was unable to understand the reason for her going away and went to request her to come back. She promised to return on condition that Aatya and Isari would be thrown out. When Jayram and Kuvvari reached home, they heard a child's cry. They looked at each other in surprise. Jayram asked Aatya whether there were any guests in the house. Aatya told him that Isari's labour pains had started soon after he had left and that she had delivered a child. 'Parasha's wife came to help her and has just left. I brought a bottle of wine from uncle's house to wash her hands. She only made porridge of nagali for Isari. She asked me to bring the bark of *rangatroda* and give it to Isari in fresh wine so that she has no trouble in future. I have also added mahua to it. I am now going to the forest,' Aatya briefed Jayram.

When Aatya left for the forest Jayram earnestly requested Kuvvari to wait for another five days, assuring her that he would ask Aatya and Isari to leave after that. On the fifth day he called them and said, 'On Ganpat's prompting Kuvvari wants you to leave. I am helpless as she has threatened to leave the house if you don't. Take your goats and leave.'

Aatya led his flock and trudged his way. Isari followed him with the baby in her arms. Aatya took Isari to Govinda and then left for Bodharipadha alone. He got back to work. He cut the hay, swept the roof and covered it with the fresh hay. In the morning he went to Ganpat's house to bring cow-dung. Ganpat was surprised to see him.

‘What do you want the dung for? Are you taking it to your father-in-law’s house?’ he asked.

‘No! I want to spruce up my own house.’ Aatya was not in a mood to say more.

After setting the house in some order, he came to his father-in-law’s house. Isari had not slept the whole night. ‘Look, the baby has not drunk milk since last night. His belly seems puffed. I sat up the whole night. Mother prepared porridge for me and I had only that for dinner. Then on my father’s instructions she made a roti of kasur so that I may lactate,’ she informed Aatya.

That evening the baby vomitted the milk and closed its eyes. When Govinda came home Aatya said to him, ‘Uncle, how could you be so careless as to make her eat kasur roti? Look at the baby’s tummy. It has puffed out. He has thrown out the milk.’

‘Your aunt eats everything when she delivers a baby. My mother also used to eat everything that was gathered from the forest when she was a nursing mother. Do you expect mothers to die of starvation for their babies’ sake during the time of this drought? She must eat something to lactate. Go and bring some wild cumin seeds. Tell Isari to pump out milk in a shell and mix the seed in it. The baby will be alright after drinking the milk.’

The baby breathed his last immediately after drinking the milk. Aatya came home with Isari the same day and never went to his in-law’s house again.

Supa, Isari’s mother, had been to Karanji, her sister’s place. One day her sister gave her a few pieces of the bitter root. The next day, she brought a basketful of roots from the forest. She cooked them and invited Supa to peel them. As they busied themselves with peeling she said to Supa, ‘You have many mouths to feed. How do you manage? These roots will be useful to you. Now you know what to do. Cook and peel them, chop and leave them in the flowing water of the river for the night. This will wash away the bitterness of the roots. Cook them again in sufficient water. Strain the water and spice them with some salt and chilli. They are then ready to eat. But be watchful, people steal them at night.’

‘What is this sister? The long one? Is it the same root?’ asked Supa as she helped her sister.

‘No, that is different. They call it *vajkand*. It is not bitter. But it

produces sickness. When we first ate it, we threw up the whole night. Then your brother-in-law gave us *ambali* water and we were alright. Now we have added it to our daily diet.'

Supa returned to Savarpada. One day, equipped with a pitcher full of porridge, she went to Govinda's shed. Leaving the pitcher there, she made for the *zakada* forest. She picked a basket full of *vajkand* and returned.

'What have you brought? You will die if you eat anything of this kind,' warned Govinda. 'I am scared since the day I prescribed wild cumin seeds for the new born baby. He succumbed to death, you know.' He tried to dissuade Supa.

'I know. But don't you bother. You know, the *Mavchis* from *Bundadi* feast on them daily. Come, let us try. I will cook them.' Supa could not be discouraged by anything.

'No! I won't. Somehow I manage to keep my body and soul together by looking after the cattle.' However, he gave in and reluctantly tasted it.

'Why, it tastes nice. I did not know, otherwise I would have tried it long back. At least I would not have starved. How does the vine look like? You must show me, Supa.' Govinda was excited.

Supa ate the roots all the way back home. But there was commotion in Govinda's quarters. He suffered from dysentery. He managed to drive home the cattle he had taken out for grazing and threw himself down on the verandah in Jayram's yard. Just then Isarya, his son, came running. On seeing his father lying down, he started crying. Jayram too rushed to help him.

'Aaba, my father is lying here and my mother is vomiting continuously. What do I do?' Isarya was inconsolable.

Govinda did not have the strength to get up and go to the toilet. He passed motions and vomited, alternately, in the verandah where he was lying. He threw up spume now. Jayram got the cart ready and drove Govinda to his house. On the way Govinda told him how this had happened. No sooner did they reach home, than Govinda lost consciousness. He turned to Supa who was eight months pregnant. The baby died in the womb. Supa could not have survived. She passed away and Govinda followed her. Children were crying by the dead bodies. Finally, Jayram got Isarya to control himself and asked him to go to Aatya and also give the message of death to a few villagers.

Isarya ran to his sister's place. Before he could summon up strength, he threw himself at Isari's feet. She, with the help of Aatya, brought him back to consciousness. But his jaw was locked. Aatya had to use a scythe to open it. It was not easy for Isarya to take in the news of his parents' death. Isari too cried her heart out. Aatya consoled them and they came to Govinda's house.

'Let us shift Supa also along with Govinda. We will have to prick her hand with a *babul* thorn. When pregnant women die they come back as goblins. Look at her. Looks as if she is drenched in yellow and the body is puffed! What a strong woman she was! Even four men will not be able to carry her.' Jayram said in a patronising tone.

Both Supa and Govinda were carried to the cemetery and buried together.

'Aatya, go and call that bitch. Tell her that Supa has delivered the baby. We must see to it that she takes the responsibility of all children,' said Jayram.

Aatya went to Karanji and came back with Vani, his younger mother-in-law. She did not know about her sister's death. She went in and called her sister. All the children came crying and held on to her. She was taken aback. In the meantime Aatya gathered together the villagers. Jayram came with a stick hidden behind, and hit Vani hard on the back. She screamed in pain rubbing her back and urinated. On hearing her cry, people rushed inside and started to beat her. 'Beat the bitch. She is responsible for the death of our friend,' Jayram yelled. 'Let her look after all the children. She must!' They tore her blouse and continued to beat her until she fainted, her entire body swollen.

Finally, with two of the orphans—Jeevali and Bhagi—Vani left for Karanji. Aatya and Isari took charge of the remaining three—Isarya, the eldest, Tukya the younger one and Ravji, the recently weaned baby—and moved to Bodharipada.

By now, Aatya's flock had grown and Isarya took responsibility of grazing the goats. Aatya started working for Ganpat on daily wages of one kilogram of food grains. Isari delivered a baby for the second time. However, for want of one square meal, he sold a goat in the market of Pimpalner for just five rupees. He spent three rupees on other necessities and returned home with two rupees. He told Isari that they would repay what they owed to Bhuri aunty lest they might be tempted to spend the money. He instructed her to mix mahua

with *sava* since there were five mouths to be fed and *sava* alone would not have lasted them. Though he owned a small piece of land, no one was ready to till it.

‘Forget it, what’s the use? Last year it took the entire day for the two of us to cut the grass.’ Isari dismissed the idea of worrying over farming.

The next day Aatya went to Bhilati to see aunt Bhuri. He told her that his responsibilities had increased with the loss of his parents four years back and the recent loss of his in-laws too. He was the only bread winner for all the children now. Nevertheless, he wanted to pay the dues to Bhuri.

‘Brother, why do you think so much? Life has just begun for you. You will have your day. Your father has at least left a piece of land for you. Look at me, in this big community I have to fend for myself. Hand to mouth!’

The two came to Aatya’s house. ‘Here is your money: eight annas and a bit of *sava*! Take this. I had to borrow some wine from Ganpat to wash hands,’ Aatya said to her.

Bhuri was excited at the thought of wine. ‘Why, it is my privilege to drink wine offered by my nephew. I will happily go back home after that. Isari, have you named the baby?’

‘Call him what you want,’ said Isari to Bhuri.

‘His mother went picking Kasur before his birth, so let us call him Kasarya.’ Bhuri suggested.

Aatya went to buy medicine for Isari. Isari got back to work on the farm with her little brother clinging to her. Tukya stroked Kasarya to sleep and went to play. On return, Aatya said to Isari, ‘Here is your medicine. We should never listen to anyone however clever they may be. We would not have lost our first baby had we been wise enough to ignore their advice.’

‘I am not a goblin to kill my baby.’

‘I did not mean it that way. But I have heard people saying that the goblins eat their first offspring. I am telling you what people say. You need not believe it.’ Aatya tried to appease her.

Isari had taken after her mother. Fair, tall, strong, with a snub nose! She looked at Aatya in anger and retired into the inner chamber. Tears came to her eyes as she thought of her parents. Her brothers held on to her and started crying with her. Aatya consoled her and



she stopped crying. Little Kasarya woke up at the same time. Tukya tried to silence Kasarya by swinging him but he would not stop. Aatya took him to Isari and asked her to look after him. Then Aatya went out to bring grass for the goats. Soon Ganpat came to see him and requested him to help him thresh rice. Isari also joined them.

Ganpat was fair, short and snub nosed, whereas Aatya was dark, tall and strong, with a sharp nose. Sunita was groaning in pain when Aatya and Isari reached Ganpat's farm. Ganpat took her home. Aatya and Isari worked alone until the rice was taken to Ganpat's house. Ganpat offered him some, as wages for the job. They returned home. Isari winnowed the rice for the evening meal. Tukya played by her side. Suddenly, he started crying. His eye was smarting under a tiny bristle of the threshed rice. Isari gathered him in her lap. She then held water in her mouth and spitted the same in his eye. But he had no relief. Aatya finally put him in the swing to sleep. Isari cooked rice and sent Isarya to fetch water. Aatya milked the goats. Tukya's eye had swollen. He had rice and milk. After the evening meal they all went to bed. But Isari was tossing and turning, pining for her brother.

The next morning, too, the two went to Ganpat's farm to thresh rice. They worked together and finished the task. Ganpat came to the farm to collect the rice. Isari left for home. Aatya helped him load the stock on the cart. Ganpat gave the last bundle of rice to Aatya. When he returned home, he seemed happy. 'Look, we have enough rice now. This will last us for quite a few days,' he said to Isari. 'There are a few more stacks on the farm, I will bring them home.' He wanted to go right away but Isari was irritated with the double duty of looking after the child and cooking. Moreover, the anxiety over Tukya's swollen eye added to her restlessness. She would not let Aatya go out now. For a minute she even wished she were dead. Aatya picked up Kasarya and sat on the swing while Isari resumed grinding grains for the evening meal. Just then Kasarya puked the milk. Aatya handed over the child to Isari. He was unable to understand the cause. 'Is it the bright sun or the goblin that has possessed the child?' he asked Isari.

Isari sat with Kasarya in her lap. He would not drink milk. She gave him water but within minutes he lay dead on her lap.

The loud cries brought the neighbours to their house. Ganpat

came and took charge of everything. He asked them to get ready for the burial. He coaxed Aatya to hurry up since it was getting darker. He wondered whether the family was under some sinister spell. A visit to the cemetery at such short intervals! He was instructing everyone. He suggested that the child be buried next to Aatya's parents.

Isari's breast was stiff with milk and she lay down alone until the men returned from the burial. Aatya came forward to make the porridge. She gave it to the younger brothers and went to bed.

The next morning, after milking the goats, Aatya went to Ganpat's house. As they sat chatting, Ganpat said, 'I saw our forefathers last night. They said, "We are with god now. You should build a memorial for us. A stone pillar! So that you will live happily." We must go to the village priest tomorrow.'

Aatya looked on in dismay. 'How can I? Uncle, I have no money and we are starving,' he said. He could not hide his anxiety.

'Don't you worry. Thresh some grains in the morning and come after breakfast with the bag of rice,' Ganpat instructed him.

The next day Aatya and Ganpat went to Mohana to consult Dalpat, the priest. Dalpat put the grains in a sieve to strain and declared, 'Brother, the quantity of the grains on both the sides is the same. It means your forefathers wish that you build a memorial, a pillar for them. They are united with god. Now it is your duty to act on their wish.'

A day after, Aatya and Ganpat went to Dapur, in Sakri taluka. They contacted Malaji, the Bhil and asked him how much he would charge for the job of erecting two pillars. Malaji demanded five rupees for two and waited for instructions from Aatya with regard to inscription on the pillars. Ganpat told him to draw a staff, a symbol of god and a pipe on one in the name of his father who was a priest and with only a pipe on the other, in the name of Pandya. They returned home with Malaji and showed him the stone. Malaji approved the stone and cut it into two. He then proceeded to carve pictures on them: Pandya, Biju and a pipe on one and Dipya, a pipe and a staff on the other. A few villagers were invited to rate the work and they were all were pleased with the job.

Ganpat now called Marya, the priest. He searched for the exact spot where the dead had breathed their last. He dug the ground there

to pick up the rounded stones. After tying them together with a rope, he put them in a basket. The stones made noise. He burnt ghee to purify the stones in the rising smoke and later sprinkled cow urine on them. It was time to put the basket on the head of a virgin. The pillars were loaded on the bullock cart. Aatya brought a male goat from his house. The procession moved towards the hill with Marya dancing ahead. He was doubtful whether the cart would go up the hill. He would have preferred to install the pillars on level ground. But Aatya had made up his mind. He pulled the reins and the bullocks went up the hill galloping.

When they finally reached the top, Ganpat unleashed the bullocks and the cart was unloaded. Marya took some *sindoor* in a coconut shell and smeared it on the pillars. Sukarya dug the ground to install the pillars. Marya came forward to bury the rounded stones in front of the pillars. He then wrapped a dhoti around the pillars and put small rags on the head. A handful of rice was scattered and betel nuts were offered. Marya murmured all the while. Ganpat and Aatya came forward to bow to the pillars. The others followed them. Marya was in a trance. He shouted, 'Sacrifice the goat now.' Aatya rushed to slaughter the goat. Blood splattered around. Dipping his finger in the blood, Aatya smeared it on the poles. The tail of the goat was wrapped around the neck of the pillars. Ganpat proceeded to consult the priest about lunch and the offering of sacred food to god. But Marya dismissed the idea. 'Look at the beehives hanging from the tree. If you sit down to cook here, the smoke will rouse the bees and they will attack us all. Do you want to die? Let us pack up and go home to prepare lunch. We will return here to have lunch.'

They returned home in the cart loaded with all things. Marya instructed the women to make rotis. The men were sent to gather palash leaves to make bowls by stitching them together with straw. Marya took charge of cooking the meat. When it was ready, Ganpat and Marya took a small quantity of the food as offering to god. Aatya invited everyone for lunch. After lunch, they greeted each other by giving a customary hug and went to their homes. Since that day the pillars continued to be worshipped every year on the sacred day of *Akshat Tritiya*.

## The Wedding

When Isari returned home with the pitcher she had a pleasant surprise. Vani had come to see her. Isari shared the story of the pillars with her. She described how the pillars were erected in memory of her uncle and aunt and Dipya. She also complained that Vani had been so late in visiting her when there had been a death in the family, just like a guest.

‘That is not true. They beat me like a beast, the men of Savarpada! I would not have come even today had it not been for Jethya’s work. He asked me to look for a boy for his daughter. Let Ravaji stay with you. I will take Isarya and Tukya with me. Jethya has only daughters. He lives comfortably and has cattle too. It will be good for our children. You have no farm. So let us go ahead with this proposal,’ Vani insisted. Noticing Tukya, she asked, ‘What’s wrong with Tukya’s eye?’ It was swollen. Isari now shared with her the story of the mishap.

‘How could you let it happen? Such a handsome boy! Fair like his mother! Nose and lips so well-cut as if some sculptor has carved them! What have you done to him? Isarya took after his father; dark and snub-nosed!’ Vani’s inquietude and concern for Tukya was visible in every word she uttered. Isari was now worried about what to serve for lunch. After all, Vani was her aunt. ‘You chose the wrong time to come,’ she said to Vani. ‘There is nothing in the house. We have consumed all the rice given by uncle Ganpat. I bring ants and cook them everyday, or pick kasur sometimes. But we were busy with the rituals for the last two days. Today I will have to do with just mahua.’ Isari regretted.

‘Never mind! Anything will do. We eat even bitter roots,’ Vani consoled her.

Vani returned to Karanji with Isarya and Tukya. In the evening she sent for Jethya. He came with Nathi to see Vani.

‘Here is my daughter. Take a look at her and tell me your decision.

I like the boy and accept him as my son-in-law. However, I will not allow him to sleep with her if he insists on it today. He must give me a promise that he will not touch my daughter for five years.' Jethya wanted the assurance.

'Brother, that is the custom in our community,' Vani replied.

Isarya started working with Jethya while eight-year-old Tukya engaged himself with grazing the cows. Nathi was a bit more obtrusive when Tukya was around, always trying to impress him. Jethya had selected two cows for her. It was the fifth year since Isarya began to work here. He dreamt of winning over Nathi very soon. But Nathi doted on Tukya from the beginning. One day she asked Tukya to wait on the way, with the two cows. She put on all her jewellery, wore a sari and two blouses and joined Tukya. Leaving the cows on the farm, they climbed the Satmala Hill and arrived at Isari's house. When Tukya told her about their elopement, she was furious. 'This is not fair. Your elder brother is slogging to complete the term of five years. How dare you run away with his intended wife? If her parents ask for dowry, what will you do? Ours is only a hand-to-mouth existence, you know,' she shouted.

The next day Jethya set out with Isarya for Aatya's house. He had covered his head with a piece of dhoti besides having on the vest and the loincloth. What a figure! Dark, short and fat! Isarya walked ahead of him. As soon as they arrived at Isari's house, Jethya banged the stick he was carrying. Alarmed, Isari came out, and ashamed, she instantly disappeared in the house. Why wouldn't she feel embarrassed? Her breasts hung out of holes in the blouse and around her waist was a torn sari that barely covered her buttocks! She had worn a string of beads—just seven or eight—around her neck. Aatya was yet to come home.

Isarya rushed to her and said in distress, 'Tukya ran away with my prospective wife yesterday. My father-in-law says that he will marry her off to Tukya, if she is found. He asked me to work for five more years so that he can get his younger daughter to marry me.'

'Isarya, I did take them to task, abused them. But in anger they went out and sat under the big palash tree until it got dark. Then Ganpat took them away,' Isari sympathised with Isarya.

Isarya called out to Ganpat, who came out with a baby in his

arms. He greeted Jethya and told him that Nathi and Tukya were in his house. Jethya returned to Karanji with Isarya, Tukya and Nathi. He got Meeru, his younger daughter, married to Isarya and they all stayed under one roof.

Isari and Aatya lived in dire poverty. Starvation and hunger pursued them. Aatya and his second paternal uncle worked with Ganpat. In summer, Isari would collect wild grains stored by the ants, wash them and keep them ready for use. She also went picking kasur on other occasions. She had to provide for a family of five including Ravji, her brother and two kids. When Ravji was seven, he started working; he grazed the cattle.

In summer during the months of March and April, when the mahua was in blossom, Aatya and Isari went to the forest with Devji and Ziprya, their sons. They spent the night under the tree. Aatya surveyed the area in the dark and lit a fire. Isari came forward to pick flowers. What a sight! The mahua trees were in full bloom! Every tree seemed to be smiling, giving an assurance that there would be a greater yield. Flowers rained down and Isari had a tough time picking them. When the basket was full, she asked Aatya to carry it home. She gave instructions for Ravji too. He was to let the calves free to feed. Isari had kept his breakfast ready before she left for the forest. Aatya had to make rounds to take the stock home. He joined Isari to pick flowers and they went on with their task, chewing a few. Isari made bowls of palash leaves and filled them with the mahua blossoms for Devji and Ziprya. The two happily chewed them and played. In the afternoon, after having feasted on mahua, Aatya and Isari walked homewards, carrying the basket and a bundle on their heads. Devji walked ahead while Ziprya enjoyed the walk in his mother's arms. As they walked, the juice of the flowers ran down their heads. Isari felt worried that her hair would get all matted and sticky. She even feared the infection of lice, in which case she would be completely helpless since there was no one to kill the lice. She handed over the child to Aatya. He too wanted to rush back home since his vest had become sticky and he immediately wanted to go to the river for a bath. Back home, leaving the flowers to dry, Aatya went to the river. After a bath he relaxed, killing the lice. At home Isari waited for him to fetch water for her but not for long. She too went to the river and shouted at him for being irresponsible, 'The

children are hungry and I have to cook. You are idling. Hold this baby and let me wash my hair.'

'Not really! Listen to me. There were so many lice in my loincloth. I have only one loincloth and can't help using the same everyday. What can I do?'

'How did you manage to have a bath with one loincloth then? You use *kudchi* for the loincloth and it gets torn soon. We have no money. Our children wander without clothes, we need to protect them. Don't you know how Ravji shivers in cold early mornings on his way to the forest?' Isari nagged at him.

Aatya got ready, and balancing the pitcher full of water on his head, he walked off. Isari followed him. 'I go to the river to bathe. I wash my loincloth and leave it for drying. In the time that it dries completely, I hide myself, naked, behind a boulder. Only after I ensure that there is no one around, I run back and put on my clothes.' He tried to explain the reasons to Isari as they walked home.

'Don't make excuses. You can afford to live on in this way. But what will I do? Enough of it! Let's get going. I am hungry. The mahua juice has been digested. I am tired of eating the same thing everyday. You must go to uncle Ganpat today and ask for the cart. Take the sheaves of hay to the market and sell them. Buy me a sari and a blouse, the quality does not matter. The rest you can spend on foodgrains. The rains are not far away. If everything goes well this year, we may expect the best yield, beginning with mahua. Our forefathers often said that rains came even before the harvest was done. They covered the stacks with teak leaves stitched together only to be opened with the next harvest. Gone are the days of such rich harvest!' Isari was thinking of the days gone by.

Isari prepared porridge. Taking some in an earthen bowl, Aatya waited for it to cool. Isari came out with the vessel of porridge and fed Devji and Ziprya when it cooled. Just then Tukya and Nathi arrived. 'Sister, my father-in-law abuses me, no matter how hard I work. He is all praise only for Isarya. Isarya's wife also abuses Nathi. She beat us that day of Waghdeo fair. Uncle Ganpat too was drunk and slept. We are not going back. We will stay here and make do with whatever comes our way.' Tukya complained to Isari.

After two months, Jethya sent Isarya to bring them home. But Tukya simply refused to go. Jethya requested him to go again and

ask Nathi to come home and take the grains. He could not imagine his daughter starving. On the second visit, Isarya was successful in persuading them to go back to Karanji. Aatya also joined them. Jethya opened his heart to Tukya. 'My son, your elder brother worked five years for you. Nevertheless, I owe something to my daughter. I wish to give her what is hers. Take the reins and two bullocks. They are yours now.' With these words Jethya also asked Nathi to take the cow with the calf. Aatya took the bundle of grains and Tukya proceeded with the two bullocks. As Nathi held the reins of the cow, Meeru attacked her and snatched the cow from her. Jethya would never like it. He came down heavily on Meeru and started thrashing her. 'Leave the cow. Nathi has worked harder than you and she deserves this endowment,' he threatened Meeru. Nathi was an ordinary girl with nothing so attractive about her. Short and dark with a short nose! Meeru on the other hand was tall, not so dark, and had a sharp nose just like her father.

Aatya, Tukya and Nathi finally left for their home with the bulls, a cow and a calf and two bundles of foodgrains. Aatya's house was a small hut. Everyone ate mahua flowers but Nathi did not like them. She ate alone when everyone else had eaten. She would pretend to eat the flowers which she would throw away after two morsels. Once, Isari saw her throwing them away and told Tukya about it. However, he preferred to keep quiet.

The rains came. Aatya went to Ganpat for seeds. 'Give us some maize seeds. We have got bulls now. We will sow maize in our backyard,' he requested Ganpat.

'How can you expect anything from me? You refused to work for me. Ask your aunt. She will give you, if there are any.' He retorted. Aatya went in to check with Sunita. She said she had already ground them. Aatya returned home disappointed. He sat down in the verandah and ruminated over the eventful past. 'After my parents' death I worked hard for no one except uncle Ganpat. If he refuses to give me the seeds, whom can I turn to?' he said to himself. His heart was heavy, he sighed. Isari came out and fumed with anger when she saw him sitting idle. He too shouted at her. When they both cooled down, he asked her about Tukya. She told him that the two had gone to the river for a bath. Tukya and Nathi returned with the plough. Even before Tukya had unleashed the bulls, one of them



stuck its neck out and freed itself. Wild with anger, Tukya started thrashing it. The bull lay down. Tukya bound the bull's mouth with a rope, picked up a big stone and hit the bull on its head. The bull struggled in vain. Suffocated, it stopped breathing and died on the spot. Nathi could not take it and started crying. Hearing her cry, Isari came out. Her anger knew no bounds. She started abusing Tukya. 'What will your father-in-law say, that "My son-in-law is a butcher"? You idler, the whole summer you did little else other than whiling away time. Had you been wise, the bull would have been ready by this time. There is no point in hurrying now. It is too late. You are good for nothing. You will only go around with the begging bowl. You deserve it. And your wife, a perfect match for you! It is a year since you got married but she has never taken interest even in the domestic chores. She has not washed the floor with cow dung even once. What will she do when she has children? She won't bother if they shit in the house!'

Tukya pulled the dead bull with the help of the other bull and dumped it at the village outskirts. The Bhils in the village came by, chopped the bull and carried the meat. Tukya set out with Nathi for the forest to cut wood. They returned home with bundles of faggot and again left for the farm to cut grass. Aatya looked at them in desperation. He could not understand what was wrong with Tukya. 'I think they will not stay with us for long. They don't want to work for my children perhaps,' he said to Isari.

'Let them live separately if they want to. They did nothing for my children. I am strong enough to look after them. I brought them up and now they want to live separately.' Isari too was irritated. Tukya and Nathi brought the sheaves of grass home and started digging holes. Isari got back to her cooking. She prepared the vegetable and kasur roti and called Tukya and Nathi for dinner. However, the two spread grass on the ground and went to bed. It pricked Isari's heart and she said in a subdued tone, 'You may live separately. I won't stop you. But don't take your resentment out on the food. Please have your dinner. It is raining here.' She went to them but they covered their faces with grass and refused to move. Isari removed the grass and holding his hand, led Tukya inside the house.

'Sister, my wife doesn't want to stay here. She has threatened to leave me if I stay on. She says she can't eat mahua flowers,' Tukya

confided with Isari.

Isari tried to convince Tukya, 'Pull on for a year more. The bull will grow up and will be useful for work on the farm. Train it during summer. This year no one gave us seeds. You can send Nathi to her father's house to bring seeds from him. Both of you can till the land and have something to start on your own. I don't mind if you go away with your wife then. You will have some time to get set. How nice it will be if you build a house first! My hut is too small and it leaks during the rainy season. At night I have to drag the children closer to protect them from rain.' All of them sat down for dinner. Nathi also joined them. She threw away the vegetable and ate just the roti.

Isari was pregnant again. She fetched a big vessel of water in the morning and as she tried to put it down she experienced a sharp pain in the stomach. At once she squatted on the ground. Isarya, with a heavy bundle of food grains on his head, arrived just in time. He asked her to help him unburden his load. He was sweating and groaned in discomfort. 'Uncle has sent me with Nathi's share of rice and wants Ravji to come and look after the cows,' he said. Isari had to make an effort to get up. She helped Isarya and lay down again, moaning. She told Aatya to serve him lunch. After having his meal Isarya went to see Tukya and Aatya rushed to fetch Bhuri. Before she reached, Isari had delivered the baby. Bhuri helped her with the post-delivery care, washed her hands and went away with a bag of mahua flowers as her wages. When Isarya came back with Tukya and Nathi, the baby was crying. 'It's a girl', said Aatya. 'After four sons she has come to help her mother.'

Isarya said enthusiastically, 'Brother, I have a daughter too, she's just started walking. With her babble of 'Aaba' she follows me wherever I go.'

Five days after Isari had delivered the baby, Tukya absconded to Pimpalner. He went to the potter and bought a big vessel for one paisa and two smaller ones for half. He then spent a rupee to buy nagli along with salt and chilli. He returned with all the provisions and started living separately with Nathi from then on.

Jethya, Isarya's father-in-law, passed away. His brothers, Thogya and Jogya, forcibly seized the farm and the house. Isarya, Meeru and Ravji ran away the same night in fear, with two bulls and two cows,

taking whatever they could; their two little daughters riding the cows. Isari was sweeping the yard when they arrived. Clinging to her feet, Isarya cried. Meeru stood by the side of the cows and the little ones ran crying to their father. Isarya wiped his tears and took their belongings inside. Meeru sat quietly in the verandah outside, holding the two daughters close. Tukya and Nathi looked at her again and again and laughed. 'Nathi, look at the bitch who beat us, now sitting helplessly!' Tukya raved.

Next day Isarya made for Aatya's farm, well equipped with the plough and the bulls. He levelled the ground and sowed *bhadla* and *vari*. Isarya had always been a hard worker. Along with Meeru he pulled out the weeds. Rains came in time. The crop was healthy and the yield was higher than expected. After harvest, they busied themselves with building the house. They cut wood for the house. Overnight, the house was ready. Isarya asked for some grains since he had sown all that he had brought. His daughters did not eat vegetables. Isari gave him some mahua flowers. Meeru roasted them and they all shared what was available.

Aatya went to the farm with cow dung. Isarya joined him with a big vessel. Isari followed them. They cleared the ground with cow dung wash. Aatya and Isarya winnowed the thrashed *kodara*. Isarya divided the stock equally between the two. But Meeru sullenly left for home, disapproving this division strongly. Isari also became furious. 'Why did your wife leave like this? What does she think? Don't we deserve our due?' She shouted at Isarya. 'Our farm is not her property. If we had grown grass in the entire field, it would have fed us for at least eight months. Isarya, take away the whole stock and give us our wages.' With these words Aatya and she left for home.

Isarya felt embarrassed. He coaxed Isari, 'Wait until I come back.'

Isarya had lost his temper. His eyes poured fire and when he reached home he took Meeru to task, 'Why did you come home this way? I know you did not like my distribution in equal proportion. But she is my sister, a mother to me. She brought us up in the most trying circumstances. What has she not done for us? You must get back to the farm and bring home our share of grains; otherwise, get out of my house. I worked for ten years in your father's house. Give me my wages and quit. You know pretty well what your uncles did on your father's death. Now be wise and come with me to the farm.'

Meeru silently followed Isarya to the farm and brought her share of grains home.

The next day Isari pounded kodara five times until she got white refined *bhagar*.

Everyone enjoyed the meal that day. Isari did not know much about the use of kodara. It grows mainly in Navapur taluka and is poisonous. One has to pound and wash it in hot water before cooking. It is to be cooked with tamarind pulp. If cooked without tamarind and eaten, one is not far from death. One becomes unconscious and spits froth, the body shivers. That day when Isari woke up for toilet at midnight, she fell down with a thud. She called Aatya, 'Come fast, give me a hand. I am shivering. Look at the children, they are lying still as if dead. Spitting out sweet water! What on earth did Isarya give to us?'

Aatya was not in a better condition. What could he do for her? They lay down till daybreak, chattering. When the goats started bleating, Isarya came running to the hut. It was his turn to be awestruck when he saw them all lying still. In a fit of anger he rushed back home and started thrashing Meeru. 'Why did you not tell Isari how to cook kodara?' He blasted her. There was no jaggery in the house so he ran to Ganpat's house. Ganpat too was scared and he came with jaggery. They mixed the jaggery with tamarind pulp, prepared a watery drink and made them all drink it. Soon they all recovered consciousness.

However, two year old Ambu, Isari's daughter, showed no signs of recovery. She had consumed both, kodara porridge and mother's milk. Isarya bathed her in cold water five times before she opened her eyes. Her big sparkling eyes brought light to the hut. Their faces beamed with happiness. She was as beautiful as her mother and also made her mother's anxiety a part of this beauty. Isari sat with Ambu in her lap. Isarya kept giving the mixture to Ambu at regular intervals. Isari proceeded to empty her breasts of the poisonous milk. Isarya fetched water and told Isari to cook mahua. 'If you eat some sweet stuff, you will shed the hangover faster,' he instructed her. Ganpat and Isarya left for their homes.

Tukya instigated Ravji to leave Isarya and persuaded him to come and stay with him. Without intimating anyone, Ravji went to stay with Tukya. Isarya was worried since there was no one to graze his

cows. The fear of wolves added to his anxiety. He requested Aatya to take this responsibility but Aatya refused. He had reasons to decline. He had goats to graze and he did not need to take them far, whereas grazing the cows meant taking them in the interiors of the forest. 'Give me your son then. I promise you that I will not sack him when I am no longer in need. When my daughters come of age, he will be my son-in-law. I have given the medicine to my wife. She will not bear any more children now. This house will belong to your son.'

Isarya's proposal sounded reasonable. Devji was to work for Ganpat. So Aatya agreed to send Ziprya to work for Isarya.

Aatya took his goats—twice the number now—to the forest, and Isari delivered the baby. Once again, a girl! Devji brought nagli from Ganpat, ground it and prepared porridge for Isari. He then went with Ambu to Isarya's house to break the news. Ambu cried for roti. Isarya gave her one and asked Devji if his mother did not cook. Devji stood speechless. Isarya could guess what the facts were and he came to see Isari. To their surprise, she was not at home. They went out looking for her. Little Ambu cried persistently, her face gone ruddy with crying. They turned towards the farm to find Isari walking alone with a sheaf of grass on her head. Isarya felt moved. He took the sheaf and they walked home. He took her to task for exploiting herself so. 'What will I eat except *bhilava* if I don't work? Moreover, I have a debt to pay to Bhuri. I have not paid her for my last delivery too. I have to cut grass until the *bajara* is ready. The cart is to be loaded. Isarya, lend the bull to your brother,' Isari's voice cracked as she spoke. Isarya brought a basketful of *bhadala* from his house but advised Isari not to have it as it was heavy to digest.

On Friday, the weekly bazar day, Aatya took the cartful of grass for sale to Pimpalner. Sitting by the side of the river, he waited for customers. The demand came to as low a price as twelve aanas to a rupee. Finally Balu, the grocer, bought it for a rupee and half. Balu asked Aatya to take it home and unload the cart to systematically pile up the sheaves in a corner. As Aatya walked in front of the cart, Balu ran to him and held his loincloth. Balu, a fair, strongly built man with a sharp nose and a white speck in one eye, could easily strike fear in Aatya's mind. So much so, that he rushed to arrange the stack,

but not before sunset. He was about to leave when Balu came to give him something. It was a bundle of broken rice, almost crumbs, wrapped in a piece of cloth earlier used for dusting shoes. Balu did not forget to tell Aatya to bring grass the next day too.

By the time Aatya reached Bhilati, darkness enveloped all. Aatya halted, and going to Bhuri's hut, asked her to join him. On reaching his house, they relaxed over wine. He offered a bag of grains to her before she left.

The next day, Phulya Kotwal, Ravlya's uncle, came to the village carrying with him files of an official record. The district officer and the registrar of the village rode behind him. They went to the forest. The villagers too followed them. When they arrived at an open plot in the midst of the forest, Phulya and the registrar proceeded to demarcate the forest land that was cleared by cutting the trees. The boundaries on all the sides were fixed by setting up flags. They measured the entire area in the open space and divided it into small plots. Each one had a flag of multi-coloured straps fixed in the ground; a kind of price tag. The district officer addressed the gathering, 'These plots are for sale. Those who want to purchase may register their names. On receipt of the final sanction of the higher authority, we will announce the price which may vary from plot to plot. You have the freedom to select and fence the plot with a stone wall.' Having enlisted the buyers, the officer and the registrar rode off.

A week after the registration, the duo, the district officer and the village registrar, appeared on the scene again for sale of land. People came prepared with pockets full of money. They bought the best quality plots except for two plots of ten acres each with less fertile soil, valued at twelve annas each. Isarya and Tukya asked Aatya for that amount of money to buy the land. Aatya had only twelve annas left. He had already paid eight annas to Bhuri and Devji had spent a rupee for Ambu. Finally Isarya and Tukya added twelve annas of their own and bought the two plots of land. However, Isari and Meeru could not get along for long. So Isarya stopped working for Aatya.

Rains were favourable that year. Virgin lands experienced the tremors of creation. It looked as if they wore a green garment. The yield was more than sufficient. Isari could do nothing but regret their bad luck. Aatya went frolicking with his flute as he grazed the goats during the day and left for Bhilati in the evening. Isari and the

children went to bed without food many a times.

Devji was in his adolescence now. Sunita took him to Zima, her brother at Gunjal and left him there assuming that he would be the son-in-law who would always stay with his in-laws in this house. However, Zima was known to be abnormal. Everyday, he secretly waited, with an axe, for an opportunity to kill Devji. He planned to kill Devji and copulate with his own daughter. Babu, his wife, was not ignorant about it and always tried to protect Devji. She would not let him alone and accompanied him everywhere. She was pregnant and delivered a baby boy. One day Devji came home for his tiffin when it got dark. Babu slept with her daughter in a corner. Devji entered the house and looked back at the door. Zima stood there with the axe in his hand. The same night Devji returned to Bodharipada.

Devji now took up grazing the goats. Freed from this responsibility, Aatya could afford to stay at Bhilati not only in the evening but also during the day. Sometimes he would not return home for two days. Isari's brothers had purchased new land. Their granary was full. Isari now worked for her brothers; she would do any odd job to earn her daily meal and fend for her children, six of them. After Ambu's birth came Jambhu, a girl; then Manu and Janya, two sons followed by two more daughters, Sunita and Asha. Even a single evening meal cost a lot. No sooner did the day break than all the children waited at their uncle's door. Tukya's wife was short tempered. She served them meals but never without a volley of abuses. She abused even Tukya. Once, a caravan of Vanjaris, the nomadic traders, arrived with their cattle in the village. Tukya and Isarya exchanged four goats for two cows and gave them to Isari.

The next week brought a proposal for Ambu from Karanji. Everyone sat down in the verandah outside. Kagdya, Isari's maternal cousin, called her. 'We have come to fix marriage. Please come out,' he said. Isari came out, trying her best to cover her body in a torn sari. Kagdya had three brothers who had seven or eight sons each. But Kagdya had only one son. He was a widower and a rich man. Ambu was engaged to Kagdya's son. Isari was worried about the meal for the guests but her brothers managed everything well. Two meals were served to the guests. The wedding day was fixed and they left. When Ambu came to know that her wedding with Kagdya's son

—jet black in complexion and a face full of small pox marks—was fixed, she flatly refused to marry him. Isari threatened her that she would marry her off in the lower caste of the scavengers, the Mahars, if she refused and she produced evidence of such a custom. Isari was under yet another pressure as the wedding date approached: how to arrange for the wedding, to provide feast to the groom's family as well as to the village. She called Isarya and Tukya and shared her worries and problems with them. They promised to bear all the expenses and told her not to worry anymore. Isarya went to the village to call all the girls to share the cooking work. Bajju, Jeevali, Seeta, Peeta, Noorja ... all came to his house, singing songs on their way.

There Aatya thought of going to Balu, the grocer. He told neither Isarya nor Tukya about it. He asked Balu to lend food grains and all other items necessary for the feast. Balu extracted hard labour in return. Aatya chopped wood till midday and carried the dung out of his house. Smudged in dung and dirt, Aatya went to the river for a bath. On the way he met Tantya, the potter, who questioned him but Aatya did not respond. After a bath when Aatya came to Balu's house, he was having his meal after which he went immediately to bed. Aatya waited till four. Balu awoke and came out; he took out the register and made the entry against Aatya's name: sixteen kilograms of *sava*. He actually gave only eight kilograms and that too mixed with crushed flint-stone. Balancing the bundle of sava on his head, on an empty stomach, Aatya walked home. As he helped himself with the porridge, he heard the girls singing.

The next morning Isarya went to Pimpalner to buy bridal wear for Ambu. Three hundred rupees that she received as dowry were spent on buying a yellow sari and blue blouse, a beaded necklace from the goldsmith for sixteen rupees, and a pair of bangles for a hundred rupees.

It was time for the wedding rituals to begin. Ambu wore a new sari and the women applied turmeric paste to her body. In the evening the people from the bridegroom's side arrived from Karanji, which was quite a distance. The villagers from all the local colonies poured in. Everyone had dinner. Tukya provided utensils to the people on the groom's side. They cooked rice and dal and finished their dinner. Isarya and Tukya now proceeded to make fire. Two big stacks of wood were arranged and the flames went up. Feet began to move in



rhythm. Men were dressed in khadi kurti and dhoti. They wrapped a piece of torn dhoti around their heads and a string of little bells around their ankles. Women wore bright yellow saris and deep blue blouses. Large ear-rings, a string made of one rupee coins around the neck and anklets, these were the ornaments they always wore on such occasions. Old women covered their heads with a piece of sari; another piece covered their lower part, below the waist, leaving the upper part naked. They fluttered their *pallu* as they danced. Men and women joined hands and formed a circle. Inside the circle, Aatya played his flute, Ravlya played the drum. Yellow and red saris shone brightly in the light of rising flames. The people on the groom's side watched and entertained themselves in the colorful panorama. Their drums remained silent.

At dawn, Kagadya instructed Isari to hasten with the rites which included applying turmeric powder, bathing and wearing new clothes. 'We have a long way to go, need to cross the hill before noon when the insects attack. With the smell of turmeric, they can track us down,' he said to her.

After heating the water, Isari called all the girls who were still dancing around the bullock cart. Ambu sat like a queen on the bier which they waved up and down. Sometimes Isarya and Tukya seated her on their shoulders and danced. Isari gloated upon Ambu and asked all of them to hurry up. The girls sang in frenzy:

The bride goes round and sits on the golden pedestal  
The groom doesn't move but is stuck as if fastened to a tree.

Finally, Isari dragged them apart and asked Ambu to sit on the special pedestal. All the girls, with babul thorns in their hands, circled her. They teased Kagadya, the groom's father, 'We will not let you lift her. Bring your girls.' Nearly ten girls from the groom's side came and tried to lift Ambu. The girls on Ambu's side pricked their bottoms with thorns. The girls came and complained to Kagadya. He patched up between the two sides and the girls on his side went in to lift Ambu, who held a small pitcher of water on her head. The girls on both the sides held the pitcher from their sides. Ambu's friends were more clever and splashed the water in the pitcher upon the girls from the bridegroom's side. They were irritated and called bad names to Ambu's friends. Tempers rose and they flung the dal

and rice cooked early in the morning at each other. With sore eyes, all the girls ran out. Ambu was left alone. Isari blamed Ambu's friends for the mess and said to Isarya and Tukya, 'Collect the dal spilt over and boil it again. We will serve the same. Lift Ambu and bring her here.'

When Ambu came out, all her friends stood around her. The people on the groom's side lifted Surya and asked him to stand on the special pedestal kept for him. As they removed the piece of cloth around his head, Ambu's friends started giggling and teasing him by singing a song:

The groom looks like a monkey  
Our bride, a fair fish in the river!

Then Aatya and Isari applied turmeric paste to Ambu's body, followed by Isarya, Tukya and others repeating the rite. Again the girls were ready with a song:

Yellow and yellow, our bride looks fair as turmeric  
Black and blacker the groom looks, as if smeared with mud.

It was now time to give hot water pitchers to the couple now and for another song:

Warm water for our bride  
For the groom, horse's urine!

The bride and the groom wore new clothes and there was a song ready for this occasion too:

The mercerized sari becomes the beautiful bride,  
The groom in rags from the dunghill stands beside!

The bride and the groom in new clothes sat in baskets full of grains. They wore the traditional ornament on the forehead. Everyone present joined hands to circle the pair. The bride and the groom held each other's hands and everyone danced as they moved round. The young friends of Ambu sang:

During the dance the groom only trails,  
Our beautiful bride fairly excels.

After nine rounds of dance, people sat down for lunch. The girls

did not spare Surya, the groom, even during lunch. Ambu was helpless and could hardly say or do anything.

It was time to bid her farewell. All the people from the groom's side went ahead dancing, followed by Ambu sitting on Isarya's shoulders. Then came all the girls. Aatya and Ravlya went ahead of everyone. They spread out a rough blanket on the ground. Ambu stood upon it and turn by turn, everyone embraced her. Isari stood at a distance with little Asha in her arms; the crowd shutting Ambu out of her sight. Ravlya came forward to disperse the girls. Isari and Ambu, locked in an embrace, started crying. She wailed, 'Mother, I am going to the world of darkness of wealth leaving you in the scorching heat of poverty.'

Isarya lifted her again and walked off. The rest of the crowd followed them until the hill enveloped the bride, the groom, and their people. On seeing her mother beating her chest in pain of separation, Asha started crying.

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## Stigma

Crest-fallen, Aatya, Ravlya, Isarya and Tukya returned home as if they had been to a funeral. Their grief of separation from a dear one was unbearable. On seeing them, Isari cried out. Ravlya too wiped his tears and tried to console her. 'Every girl has to leave her mother's house some day. We cannot keep her in our house for long. Ambu is lucky that she is married to a wealthy guy. The boy is not good looking, I know, but what a big house! Their storehouse is always full! What a wonderful fortune for Ambu!' He convinced Isari that she should feel lucky to have her daughter married in such a wealthy family. He then ordered Isarya to bring the special wine that is generally taken to beat the hangover of earlier drinking bouts.

Isarya went home to bring wine and they all enjoyed the drink. When Isarya felt a little tipsy, he called Isari and shared his feelings with her. 'Sister, let me tell you one thing and promise me that you will not say 'no' to me.' All of you know that I looked after my sister's children,' he said to Tukya and Ravlya, 'I have no son and my daughter has come of age now. I don't wish to send her away after marriage. Instead, I would like my son-in-law to stay with us. I intend to choose Ziprya for my daughter, Gaju. And sister, I presume that you will accept the proposal.' He waited for her response.

'Brother, do as you wish. Your brother-in-law is so careless that he is not worried about anything. He spends most of his time in Bhilati, you know.'

'I have a plan. We will invite a few people for a dance. I will bring a pat of jaggery and new clothes for both and we will tie the knot. This sacred nuptial knot tied in the presence of even five people will be a lifelong bond for the two. What do you say?' Isarya explained to Isari.

Aatya did not return home for two days. He owned a fairly large number of goats now, about four score. By the end of the day Devji

was utterly tired grazing them. He dropped off to sleep in the verandah outside. Isari, along with five children, slept in the house. In the quiet hour, burglars broke open the fence of reed and entered the house. They carried away two big goats.

In the morning, Devji went to the cowshed and was shocked to see that the fence was broken, making way for light to spread in the shed. Even more shocking was the discovery that two fully grown goats were missing. He informed Isari about it and she rushed to the shed.

‘I have no doubt that the thieves must have stolen the goats. You too are careless. When you sleep nothing can wake you. About Aatya, less said the better! You will find him in Bhilati, go and fetch him at once.’ Isari shouted in anger.

Devji made for Bhilati early morning. On reaching Bhuri’s hut he saw Ravlya fast asleep and Bhuri sweeping the house. He told her about the theft and asked her about Aatya. She called Ravlya who got up at once. He took Devji to his sister’s house. Jura, Ravlya’s sister, was a widow and a mother of four daughters. She was short and snub-nosed, but fair and attractive. Devji questioned her about Aatya. Aatya, who slept wrapped in her sari, instantly came out in a frenzy. Devji informed him about the theft and the two set out for home. As they walked Aatya warned Devji not to tell Isari about his overnight stay at Jura’s residence.

‘I will not tell mother about it. But why did you spend the night there?’ Devji enquired.

‘I was drunk and did not know where I was. I thought I was at home and slept,’ said Aatya, trying to justify himself.

After combing the forest close to her house, Isari returned home with a stack of wood and a staff in her hand. As soon as she saw Aatya she threw down the stack and started thumping him on the back. Gnashing his teeth, Aatya bounced back raving; he lifted her and dashed her against the floor. With a terrible throe in the chest Isari tried to get up but could not do so without help. She cried in pain. All the children rushed to her and lying on her chest, started crying. Isarya and Tukyia rushed in time to push them aside and helped Isari to sit up. She pressed her chest and cried. Isarya loosened her blouse to check if anything was wrong. He could feel the crack in the rib. Helping her lie down, he turned to Tukyia. ‘Bring the rope. That

drunkard bastard! An insolent swine must be curbed. Wants to go to Bhilati?’ he shouted.

Fretting and fuming in anger, Tukya and Isarya fastened Aatya to a pillar. Tukya took hot water and poured it on him, ‘Will you beat my sister again? You could have sold two goats and earned enough to buy grains. Had you stayed at home they would have never stolen them. The mistake is yours and you beat your wife for it.’ With these words he turned to Jabu and told him to take the axe and go to the farm to bring the bark of *madulvi* and palash. ‘Get up and look after your mother instead of sitting here. We have not beaten him to death. That swine, your father! Fucks and runs to Bhilati!’

Isarya and Tukya pounded the bark with a stone, put the powder in a small piece of cloth and tied the knot. Heating the pack, he tied it on Isari’s chest. Aatya was getting restless as the wet rope around his body was getting stiffer. The pain was unbearable now and tears ran down his cheeks. ‘After the death of our father and mother, I brought you up. I washed and bathed you. And you are bent on taking my life today. I was wrong. I promise you that I will neither harass nor beat your sister again,’ he cried.

Isarya asked his daughter, Gaju, to send food for all. He served food to all children. Devji came home in the afternoon for lunch and Isari told him to take some mahua flowers from her house. Nathi came to prepare the porridge for Isari.

At about two in the afternoon, Ambu arrived with Surya, her husband. Her father-in-law had sent some rice and tuar dal with her as a gift to her family. Dumping the bundle on the ground she rushed into the house to find her mother groaning in pain. She suspected fever but Isari narrated the whole story of her husband’s misdeeds. Ambu cooked rice and dal for everyone and with hot water, fomented the bruised limbs. Isari felt a little better and went to call Isarya since there was no one in the house to talk to her son-in-law.

‘I will call the girls tomorrow morning to cook so that Ambu can carry the stuff with her. We will also give her two bundles of *mav*. Ziprya and Gaju will dance for the newly wedded couple.’ Isarya suggested. Isari’s anxiety lay somewhere else.

‘How can I buy a sari and blouse for Ambu? I have no money,’ she said in dejection.

‘You don’t have to worry about it. Leave it to me. I will manage

everything. Surya has worked for me ever since he was a child. I never paid him anything until he grew up to become a young man. If I had employed somebody else I would have spent a lot by now.'

Isarya came and greeted Surya and they sat chatting for a while. Aatya came in stealthily and sat beside them. Isarya prepared a special lunch of—chicken—for Ambu and Surya. He also sent some food for Isari and Devji. In the morning, he called the girls from the neighbourhood and left for Pimpalner to shop for a few things. Aatya and Surya went to the nearby stream to prepare wine. Tukya took rice grains rolled in turmeric powder to every house in the three colonies.

The girls came laughing to Ambu's house. They observed her keenly and started teasing her. 'What a change! We can't recognise you,' they said, noticing the change in her dress. 'How fair and lovelier you look in this black blouse! And the silver jewellery only adds to your charm. You look no less beautiful than the moon!'

'Most women at Bundhadi wear blouses, mother. Only older women wear two piece upper garment and a sari stretched up to the knees. The young wear saris falling up to their feet.'

Ambu and the girls busied themselves with grinding rice and *bhadla*. Meeru engaged herself with prompting Gaju secretly against her father. 'Don't listen to your father. Aatya beats his wife. His son will do the same with you. You should be careful before getting married. Take a promise in advance and in the presence of the villagers that he will behave well. Do not talk to Ziprya. On the completion of one year, we will pay him his dues. I have only two daughters and they are my most beloved,' Meeru asserted.

Ravlya came with a drum. Aatya carried his flute. People from all the three colonies thronged to Isari's house. They sat in rows in front of the house. Bhagi placed the earthen jars of wine at the centre. Ravlya performed the puja by applying sindoor to the jars and sprinkling the rice grains. Then he invited Aatya and Isarya along with the others to hold the leaf and perform the puja. He then instructed them to sprinkle a few drops of wine on the ground before distributing it among the people. Aatya and Isari stepped forward, followed by Isarya and Meeru. They sprinkled a few drops of wine on the ground. Now Ravlya invited Gaju and Ziprya, who was dressed

in a soiled dhoti, a readymade vest and a cap of rough cloth. Nevertheless, he looked handsome. Fair in complexion with a sharp nose, he had taken after his mother. He stood by Ravlya's side but Gaju was not to be seen anywhere. Women started whispering. Isarya lost his temper and shouted at Meeru, 'Where is Gaju? If you bring shame to me before all the people, I will cut your nose and throw you out of my house.' With these words he ordered the boys to storm into the house and pelt stones at the mahua tree so that Gaju would feel scared and immediately come out. The strategy worked. Boys pelted stones and Gaju shouted in fear. She climbed down the tree. Tukya held her arm and abusing her along with her mother, he dragged her out of the house. Freeing herself, Gaju tried to hide among the girls. Ravlya raised his voice, 'Gaju, shall we drink in celebration of your proposed marriage?' Frowning in anger and gnashing her teeth, Ambu stared at her. She had suppressed her indignation caused by Ziprya's year long stay in their house. On the other hand, irritated by Gaju's behavior, Isarya dashed at her with a stick. 'Aaba, please do not beat me', she cried. 'Ask uncle Ravlya to drink wine.'

Betel leaves were distributed and wine was served. It was time for songs now, songs to tease the people on the bride's side. The chorus amused the listeners:

Wine like urine for you,  
 Brother Isarya, wine like urine!  
 Never shall we drink brother,  
 Never shall we drink.  
 Torn leaves for you brother,  
 Torn leaves for you!  
 Not for us, the torn leaves!

Father-in-law like Isarya  
 Looks for a son-in-law who would stay with him  
 Will a mother-in-law like Meeru  
 Keep him in the house?

The songs from the groom's side were sufficiently provoking for the girls on the bride's side. They responded with the same vigour and rigour:



Ambu asks for wine and the sister too  
Drown them in wine till they swoon.

Jeevali asks for rice and the sister too  
Beat her till the body swells with woe.

Return the special vest, brother  
Return the vest  
How callous your mother-in-law  
Will never keep you in the nest.

Finally, Ravlya got up to calm the girls. After lunch he got ready to beat the drum. He told Aatya to get back to his flute. 'We will play music and they will dance till the day breaks,' he said to Aatya. As the notes penetrated the surroundings, hands intertwined and feet moved in rhythm. The tinkling of the bells around the ankles added zest to the music of the flute and the drum.

At dawn, the music stopped. Ravlya and Aatya signalled Isarya. He brought two pitchers. Surya distributed betel leaves and Isarya offered wine to all. The dancing resumed.

The sun rose, bringing in bright daylight. Ambu proceeded to get hot water for bathing. Bhagi, Jeevli and Raju busied themselves with other preparations. They brought wooden seats, turmeric paste and water. Ziprya lifted Gaju and placed her on one seat. He stood on the other. This was the time to apply turmeric paste to the bride and the groom; Isarya and Meeru smeared the paste on Gaju and Aatya and Isari applied the paste on Ziprya. Others followed. The bride and the groom were given a bath and they proceeded to put on new clothes. Meeru brought two baskets of rice grains and placed them on mortars. Gaju and Isarya sat on them. The loose ends of their garments were tied into a knot. Meeru came forward to put their heads together. They came out in the open ground and held each other's hands. People held them on both the sides and made them dance. They danced nine rounds. Then Ziprya's friends broke away and took him to a corner, under the mahua tree. Everyone gave a parting hug to him turn by turn. Now Devji lifted him and placing him on the shoulders, Ziprya was carried to Isarya's house. Seeing Ziprya off, Isari and Ambu returned home with tears in their eyes.

The next day Ambu said to her parents, 'I want to discuss

something with you. Promise me that you will not decline my request. I will take Devji with me. My family is wealthy and we need to hire labour from the village. So let Devaji work and stay with me. How will you manage to survive without resources here?’

Isarya accepted the proposal and allowed Ambu to take Devaji with her. ‘I will ask Manu to graze the cows. Uncle Ganpat has requested that Jambu be sent to work with him since his second son too is abnormal. I am thinking of cultivating two farms this year.’ He assured Ambu.

‘I have to shoulder many responsibilities. There are too many men working on the farm and I have to distribute lunch to them. They undertake to develop and cultivate farm after farm on a rental basis. That is why we can feed so many. We must leave now. We have been away for so many days. They will take us to task if we don’t return,’ Ambu said earnestly.

Ambu, Surya and Devji left for Karanji the next day. Ganpat hired Jambu at the rate of twelve champas of grains and a sari a year to do the housework. Isarya offered sixteen champas to Manu for grazing the cows and cutting the grass. Manu also helped Gaju to grind grains. He did many odd jobs such as fetching water, chopping wood and collecting cow dung.

Isarya cultivated two farms that year. Before the rains, their priest arrived. On the day people from the three colonies gathered together. They worshipped the god of rain. There was a feast for all. After lunch, Ravlya addressed the crowd, ‘Since people from all the colonies are here, let us elect our new leader and his assistant. The former ones have grown old and cannot move around in all the colonies. I propose that Isarya be our chief and Bhavram, his assistant. What do you say?’

Everyone agreed and they went home. Aatya accompanied Ravlya to Bhilati. Isarya came to Isari and said, ‘Sister, I have two farms to look after this year. However, I have been entrusted with another responsibility today. They have elected me as their chief. Now tell me how can I work on two farms? I have come to you to help me by sending Janya to work with me.’

‘Brother, you know how useless your brother-in-law is. If my sons had not worked, I would not have survived. How do you expect me to send all my sons to work with you? Why don’t you bring back

Ravji? Tukya is extracting labour from Ravji and he is not thinking about his own future at all. You can find a girl for Ravji,' Isari spoke out vehemently.

Isarya brought Ravji, his younger brother, back home. He paid Isari a year's wages for Ravji. Isari had income from three now. This was a great support to her.

The rainy season had set in. Ravji and Ziprya worked hard on the farm but they faced a dearth of food. Gaju used to bring their lunch to the farm. However, on seeing Ziprya, she would leave the stuff there and run away. Crows would feast on it. Hunger, when unbearable, took Ravji and Ziprya to Isari's house. After having their evening meal, they slept there. When Isarya came to know that they did not return home at night, he took Isari to task. 'At least you should have been wise to send them back home,' he fumed.

'Don't blame me for it. Ask your wife and daughter. They take lunch to the farm but run away from Ziprya, leaving the roti for the crows to feast. The two of them keep my sons hungry. What will they do? I have scarcely enough to last my family. Your daughter is the culprit. She takes to heels at the sight of Ziprya as one does from a ghost,' Isari spoke defiantly.

Stamping his feet in anger, Isarya came home. He called Meeru and fastened her to a post with a rope. He then called Gaju who came out trembling in fear. She screamed in fear to see her mother fastened to a post. Aatya and Isari came out running on hearing the noise.

The two of them rescued Meeru and Gaju from Isarya's wrath.

'You have been elected the chief recently and lo, what a row at home! If you are so treacherous with your own wife and daughter, what will you do when people in the village go wrong?' Aatya intervened.

'You are mistaken, my brother. What you have seen is only half the truth. Ask them what they have done. True, they take lunch to the farm but they run away from the boys as soon as they see them, leaving the food for crows to feast on. The boys slog for the whole day, carrying the cart loads and what do they get in return? Nothing! I will not tolerate this. If they fail in serving the food to the boys, I will beat them to death.'

There was good rainfall. All the farmers were blessed with a good yield. Isari joined hands with Isarya. She received one kilo of food

grains a day in return. He never weighed it. This was reason enough for Meeru to envy her and Isari was aware about this. On knowing that Meeru and Gaju did not even talk to Ziprya and Ravji, she stopped working for Isarya.

She now started going to the forest to collect vegetables. Not an easy task either! Aatya had stopped going to Bhilati after having been punished by Isarya and Tukya. But not for long! He busied himself with a new venture. Ravlya made a stack of reed for him. He never brought it home but hid it near the river bank. Everyday Aatya went to the river and adjusted the stack to block the flow of water with the result that he could collect two to three kilograms of fish trapped in the stack. What a delicious gain! Without any loss! Except for the fact that he had to shut up his flock in a pen for a while! This stack acted as a bridge to Bhilati. Aatya resumed his visits to Bhilati. Fish and wine became a daily routine with Ravlya and Aatya.

Isari once again fell on evil days. Starvation became a routine. Unable to put up with Isari's plight, Ravji and Ziprya came to Isarya. 'Uncle, we will go home for lunch from today. Poor mother! She serves only vegetables to children. We will share our roti with her,' they said to him, not knowing that this would not take them far. The need was abysmal. They took to pilfering in the forest at night. The fear of getting caught weighed heavily on their minds. Once they had a narrow escape. The next day Ziprya advised Ravji to procure the shaving blade from Isarya. He would get the scythe from his mother. This was a precaution, a provision to ensure that there won't be any sound while cutting the maize stems with a scythe instead of breaking them by bending. Stealing chilli, maize, cucumbers, groundnuts and beans became a routine with them. Isari passed days by making do with what they brought.

One day, news spread in the village that Jura was pregnant and carrying Aatya's child. When Isarya came to know about it he went to Jura's house with Ravlya who questioned her about the news.

'Brothers, once he was drunk and slept in my house. He has continued to come since then. I am carrying his child.' Jura replied.

Isarya lost his temper. Gnashing his teeth, he came to Aatya who had left for the forest to graze his flock. He then told Isari not to let Aatya go to the river that night. In the evening, Aatya returned home with his flock and was about to leave with his stack for the river when

Isari gave him the message. Aatya was wise enough to guess the reason.

With the rooster's call in the morning, Bhavram set out from his colony, carrying Isarya's message to people from all colonies about a meeting. Isari suspected that it must be about the thefts committed by Ziprya and Ravji. Hurriedly, she woke them up and sent them to the forest. Aatya too went away with his flock. The three of them worked side by side. As the sun rose, there appeared Bhavram with a group of men in the forest. Seeing them, Aatya went into hiding by the side of a stream. The men asked Ziprya and Ravji about Aatya. They pointed to the stream. As the men marched towards the stream, Aatya started running. The chase continued with pelting of stones and ended with Aatya's arrest. Bhavram plucked a slender branch of *ambadi* and tied Aatya's hands. Now they marched towards the village. The members of the village panchayat sat under a mango tree at the centre of the three colonies. The Bhils, equipped with sticks, were boiling with anger. Isarya came forward with a stick in his hands. After having asked the reasons for the delay in bringing the culprit, he turned to Aatya. Unfastening his hands, he asked Aatya if he had impregnated Jura and ordered him to confess the truth. He also warned him against the eventual crack down if he failed to do so.

'Isarya, I know why they suspect me. I am always seen with Ravalya, that is why they want to implicate me in this scandal,' Aatya stuttered.

Aatya's refusal to accept his involvement in the misdeed provoked the Bhils and they made a dash at him. The Mavchis of the other colonies also rushed towards him. Isarya intervened and silenced the mob. He sent Bhavram to Jura's house to confirm the facts.

When Bhavram came to Jura's house to tell her about Aatya's refusal to accept the charge, she flared up. 'How can he deny the fact? After gulping wine he came here and slept with me. Calls me a bitch? With four brothers staying next door, how can I do such a thing? What are Ravlya, Savlya, Bitya and Murya doing there? Tell them to beat him black and blue. That is the only way to bring him around. Tell the jury that it is him and nobody else,' said Jura, defiantly.

Bhavram returned to report to the panchayat what Jura had said. But Aatya would not budge even an inch. He kept denying the charge.

Now Isarya sent Bhavram back to Jura's brothers to find the truth. They came with him to defend their sister. 'Isarya, our sister is sure that it is none other than Aatya. You are the chief, but we will not let your brother-in-law escape. Aatya must marry our sister,' they persisted vehemently.

'Look Murya, how can I force him if he refuses to accept? Do what you want,' said Isarya.

A band of Bhils ran out and came back with the head of a dead bull. Placing it in the midst of the panchayat members, they went back to fetch the heavy grinding stone from Bhuri's house. Yet there was no response from Aatya. The Bhils thrashed him until his body swelled. They stopped only when Isarya threatened to report to the police. However, Aatya would not give in. They picked up the stinking head of the bull and with a string, fastened it around Aatya's neck. That too did not work. They now tied one blade of the grinding stone to his back and the other to his chest. Aatya, though tall and strong, bent under the weight. They had to wait until evening to finally force Aatya to speak up.

Isarya stepped forward and asked him, 'You will marry Jura but who is going to pay the fine to the jury?'

'Isarya, you pay them whatever is due. You can take my house.'

'If you sell your house, where will your wife and children go? You can't take care of your first wife and want to bring another!'

Isarya knew that the jury would not let him go unless he paid the fine. He had come fully prepared. He offered sixty five rupees to them. However, that was not all.

'You have paid the fine but what about the foodgrains and the male goat? You can't get away unless you pay the rest as per our custom.' Murya, Bitya and Aarya snapped at him.

'I will. Don't you worry,' said Isarya.

Isarya left for home along with Bhavram. He asked Meeru to call Isari. She was trembling with fear when she arrived. When Isarya informed her about the jury's decision and asked her to bring the grains and the goat, she lost her temper. Beating her chest, she shouted, 'I will not allow him to come home. Let him go with his new mistress. I will manage to live by selling wood and grass.' Finally, Isarya and Tukya arranged for everything and left. Aatya lay there groaning in pain, his body swollen all over. The stink of the dead bull's head

made him sick and he started throwing up though he had not eaten anything since morning.

The Mavchis never ate anything cooked by the Bhils. They prepared their own meal of mutton and rice. They sat down for lunch. Isarya and Bhavram provided wine to all. After lunch, Murya told Isarya that they would not let Aatya go home. 'He will stay with our sister, with our community. He must look after her. When he is defiled fully, he may go back,' he said.

'Aatya is your property. Do what you like with him. I will look after my own sister,' Isarya answered.

'I will never go with Jura, I will give away that piece of land at Pandharpas,' Aatya mumbled. Isarya came to his rescue. 'You have beaten him to death. He can't even speak. He hasn't had anything since morning. You want to take him home but if he succumbs to death, you will come into trouble,' he said to Murya.

'Take him with you then,' pondering over the situation, Murya responded.

Isarya accompanied Aatya who could anticipate another outburst of fury at home—Isari's wrath. Tukya and Ganpat followed them. Aatya had neither strength nor courage to face Isari. He stopped at Isarya's house. However, on hearing his voice, Isari came out with a stick. She raised the stick to hit Aatya but Isarya stopped her in time. He briefed her on what had happened to Aatya and how he had rescued him from the Bhils. He did not forget to tell her how they had threatened him to make the entire family eat dead bull's meat if he failed in his duties towards Jura. Isarya asked Aatya not to enter the house unless instructed. Seating him outside, he proceeded to collect a few pieces of wood and grass. He made a makeshift hut within a short time. He asked Aatya to sit inside and then set fire to the hut. Aatya ran out screaming in fear. Isarya asked him to go back.

'Don't be scared. Go inside. I will ask you, "Are you purified?" Say 'yes' and come out,' Isarya assured him. Isarya performed the ritual of purification and Aatya emerged safe, except for his loincloth catching fire. He proceeded to take a bath and sat in the verandah. Isarya sprinkled wine on him. Aatya's purification ceremony was complete.

## Grass

Isari had nightmares since that day. The dead bull's stinking head haunted her. She spitted every time she saw Aatya. The thought that her husband was defiled by the Bhils was gnawing at her mind all the time. She feared that her own people would laugh at her, deny her work and at worst, they would mock at her children and desert her.

Aatya dreaded light. He left with his flock before the day broke and returned after it got dark. Making fire, he sat outside with a blank face. Isari cooked and asked the children to serve him. After dinner he slept in the verandah. Isari detested him and the children avoided him. Sometimes shutting up the flock in the fold, he made for Bhilati. He became a stranger to Isarya, Tukya and Ganpat.

Jura delivered a baby girl. Bhuri, her mother, came to Isari's house asking for her daughter's share of grains. She said she had hardly anything to feed her daughter.

'Jiji, our lot is not different from yours. The dearth of food grains and fear of starvation is here too. We depend on our children. Isarya tills our land but we have not yet threshed the grains. Balu the grocer had lent us sava for Ambu's wedding. He is chasing us regularly for the repayment. We are stuck with debt,' said Isari, in agony.

Just then Aatya returned home. He came and sat down beside Bhuri. When she told him about the purpose of her visit he asked her to come the next morning. The next day, he went to Ganpat instead of Isarya, and confided his problem to him. Ganpat too gave him the cold shoulder saying, 'You are paying for what you did. Two wives! And the children to come! How on earth are you going to feed them?'

'What could I do? I was drunk and Ravlya dragged me into this.' Aatya had lost face as he owned his sin. Sunita passed by spitting in contempt on seeing him. Ganpat came out with a basket full of *nagali*



and asked him how he would carry it.

'Please lend me a bag if you can. I will return it,' Aatya requested him.

'How dare you touch our bag? Keep away,' Sunita came out shouting at him.

Aatya had no choice. He came home and went back with his old dhoti since there was no bag or basket in his house to carry the grains. He spread the dhoti on the ground and Ganpat poured the *nagali* from a distance. Heaving the bundle on his back, Aatya went to Bhilati to see Bhuri instead of Jura. 'Give this to Jura. Isari will abuse me if I see her. I will bring more when you are finished with this. And please give back my dhoti,' he said to Bhuri.

'What about my fees for the delivery?' she asked.

'You will get it some day. Believe me,' Aatya assured her.

Aatya left right away to graze the goats. Isari was cutting grass when he reached the farm. When she saw him she stopped cutting grass and came home with the sheaf. She went to fetch water and met Sunita there, who told her why Aatya had gone to their house. Isari could have hardly put up with this.

'He will never beg for my children even if they starve to death. But he will go to any length when it comes to do something for that bitch. I have been cutting grass since morning and attending to the goats at the same time. But why should he care for me? I wish I were dead. I am alive only for the children. I will send one to the market tomorrow to sell the grass.' Isari's words cut deep.

Isari took the kulith pods she had picked on Ganpat's farm the previous day and pounded them to make a rough mixture to prepare porridge. At the break of day, arrived Ziprya and Ravji with the groundnuts they had picked. Leaving the bundle in Isari's custody, they went to Isari's farm. She kept the bundle on the loft and set out with Janya for the market to sell grass. It was cold and Janya shivered as he trotted along. Isari wore a shredded garment. She did not mind the thorns or the pebbles and walked fast. Janya scurried about to keep pace with her, crying and requesting her to halt for a while as he was tired. Isari could not afford to stop and dragged Janya along, promising a short break round the next corner. She pointed out to the mahua tree on the outskirts of the colony. When they reached the spot, she dumped the bundle of hay on the ground and

sat down under the tree. On one side lay the fisherman's farm. He sat, warming himself by the fire. Isari took a cowdung cake and went to him. She too made a fire. The mother and the son sat warming themselves. Isarie kept the fire burning by adding garbage to it. When Janya looked at her feet, he felt shocked. They were bleeding. Janya pointed them out to her. She merely said, 'Nothing much! Struck against a stone! Somebody must have abused me.'

Blood oozed from the cracks in Isari's feet. Her feet felt numb. After some time when she recovered, she felt a burning sensation. She rubbed two stones and then put the stone to her toes and got going instantly. She crossed the farms and managed to reach the river. She had walked not less than six to seven miles by then. Poor Janya trudged alongside her. Isari arrived at Jaglya's hut. He was a Bhil.

'Uncle, please look after my child until I return from the market,' she requested him.

'Don't worry. My son is as old as yours. They can play together. This is the place where we built our house once. It got swept away in the flood. I remember having spent the night sitting on the peepal tree. At dawn, we ran away to Borband, my sister's place. Yesterday, the contractor appeared all of a sudden and started abusing me. He warned me to return to work on the farm and threatened not to pay me my year's salary. There was no alternative. I came back and built this hut,' Jaglya summed up his life's story in a few words.

Isari walked off balancing the sheaf of grass on her head. She stepped into the river. The tide was full. Carefully measuring her steps in waist-deep water, she managed to cross the river. O, what relief she experienced! She threw the grass on the ground and stood still for a minute, wondering how she would go to the village in wet clothes. An idea struck her. She plunged into the water again, sinking upto her neck, took off her wet sari and washed it. Coming out, she hurriedly wrapped herself in the other sari she carried on her head and safely made for the village. She tried her best to find a customer for the grass but there was no one. The burden on her head was too heavy. Occasionally, she lifted it above her head and held it in her hands. She thought for a minute and changed her path. She turned to the grocers' lane. It was a coincidence that she found herself standing before Balu's house. He asked her the price. 'Eight annas,' she said.

He then asked her about her village.

‘Did you not recognise me? You know Isarya, the chief. He is my brother. You have taken grass from us many times,’ she reminded him.

‘Are you Aatya’s wife? Is the harvest over? Tell Aatya, I will come to collect grains tomorrow morning,’ Balu told Isari.

‘Saheb, we are not landlords. We own a small piece of land. We have no cattle to till the farm. What can the land yield? With the help of my brothers, we grew some jwar and nagli. We haven’t threshed it as yet,’ explained Isari, waiting for his response.

‘Leave the grass here and take four aanas,’ he said.

Isari left the sheaf of grass in his verandah and requested him to pay her immediately since she was in a hurry to reach home before the river swelled. She then went to the market. A vendor was shouting, ‘Four *sakrus* for an aana.’ Isari bought four sakrus. As he poured it in the wet sari she had spread out, she picked one and ate it since she could not resist the hunger. She spent a paisa to buy half a kilogram of jaggery and two for tobacco. She did not forget to buy *dalya* for the children and instantly got going. She came to the river. Again, she had to go through the same ordeal to cross it. She resumed her walk with Janya. On the way she stopped at the farm. Taking the bundle off her head, she sat down and started scooping out the groundnuts. Janya was thirsty and insisted on going home.

‘Take it easy, my child. Look, the groundnuts are ready to eat. We will pick a handful or two and walk home eating them on the way.’ She coaxed him. However, Janya started crying. Irritated by his persistent crying, Isari abused him, ‘You brat, let Salabai take you away. Your father, that devil, is useless. Always running after that bitch! Is he going to feed you? He will let you die.’

Then they were on their toes once again, walking homeward on the same old path; Isari munching the nuts and poor Janya trotting to catch up with his mother! He stumbled over a stone and fell. Isari turned back and helped him squat on the ground. His lip was bleeding. Desperate with anger, she dragged him all along to the *rui* tree. She plucked a leaf and applied the sap to his lip. He screamed in pain, peeing in his loincloth at the same time. He fired back at his mother, ‘You witch! My lip is burning. Give me water to wash it immediately.’

‘Cool down, my child. You will be all right soon. This will help heal your lip. There is no water here. I will wash it with my spittle. Our house is not far from here. Do you see that pillar? Dhavji’s pillar! Just a few steps and we will be home.’ With these words she wiped his lip with her spittle and the two marched ahead. She stopped by the pillar and taking off the bundle, she asked Janya to wait until she offered dalya, sakru and tobacco to the pillar.

Janya’s swollen lip lolled, making it difficult for him to speak but he summoned up strength and uttered, ‘It is only a stone, mother. How can it eat dalya and sakru? It cannot speak.’

‘He is a god in stone. He will never speak. But the whole village worships him with dalya.’

On her way Isari went to Isarya’s house. She too was thirsty and gulped water and lay down. Isarya and Tukya came to her. ‘Did you manage to sell grass? You must have purchased all the necessary things, I hope,’ he asked her.

‘It wasn’t easy,’ she moaned. ‘Walked my legs off from lane to lane, hoping against hope until I stumbled upon Balu, the grocer! He paid only four aanas. He will be here to collect grains tomorrow. You must stay at home, he said.’

Isari got back to cooking when Manu came running to break the news that their cow had borne a male calf. Isari rushed to call Isarya back and said, ‘Brother, take the calf away instantly. Otherwise the grocer will claim it. After all, you had given the cow to Ziprya.’

Isarya went to the shed with a rope. Aatya was cleaning the calf with palash leaves. They took the cow and the calf to Isarya’s house. For a moment Isari forgot all pain, kissed the calf and returned home.

Aatya washed his hands and came in. ‘I am hungry. Give me roti. I could have returned earlier but could not leave the cow in pain,’ he spoke modestly.

‘Have this laddoo, I have just returned from the bazaar and am yet to cook.’ This was the first time Isari spoke to Aatya since that contemptible incidence of his taking a mistress.

## The Acquittal

Isarya instructed Meeru to bring rice grains for the cow. 'It would help her discharge the impure blood,' he said. But Isari could not agree that it would work for the cow. 'Don't you drink the soup made of *rangat-roda* when you deliver a child?' he insisted.

The cow sat down with the calf. On seeing the grains, she stood up to gobble them up instantly and sat down again. Isarya brought grass for her to induce the milk in her udders. She snapped at it. Isarya directed Meeru to hold the calf near her to feed itself. While Meeru scratched the neck of the cow, Isarya milked her and the calf drank the milk. Milk trickled from her udders now and she bellowed. The calf struggled with her udders. She then profusely discharged the bad blood. Isarya looked red with the splashes of blood all over his body. Isari warned him to step aside but he did not mind it. 'I will wash it later. The cow is just like our mother.' He looked happy tending the cow.

Packing the lunch for Ravji and Ziprya, Isarya went to the farm. There was no one in the hut. They were not to be seen. He returned home. He heard the sound of something being dropped on the ground in Isari's house. Ziprya and Ravji had cut grass and brought it home. They were feasting on the roti kept for Aatya who had left for Bhilati. Isarya told them to go to the farm and bring the package of food he had left there before anyone had the chance to steal it. Ziprya and Ravji left for the farm. Isari put the *nagli* she had stolen from another farm into the barrel. Aatya returned home at dawn. His flock quietly rested at the door. He took them back to the fold and was shocked to see the backside of the roof broken. Four of his goats were missing. He called Isari and pointed out to the broken roof and talked of the theft. 'If you run to Bhilati all the time what else can happen? Had I sold them my children would have had their bellyful at least for two days,' she blasted at him.

‘It is difficult to stay here. The thieves will come again. Let us pack everything up and go to the upper colony. I will call Ravlya and Murya,’ Aatya suggested to Isari.

Jura’s relatives came and a meeting was held. Aatya told them about his plan and consulted Tukya and Isarya on the issue.

‘If you go away whom shall we look up to in times of need? Our sister is like our mother. She is our only support.’ Isarya looked grieved at the thought of his sister going away. But Aatya had made up his mind to shift. ‘I have neither cart nor bullocks. I will give a pail of wine to the boys and they will carry my luggage. If you care for your sister, you will help her shift,’ he did not budge from his decision to shift his lodging.

‘Wait for a day, brother. Balu, the grocer, is coming today. We will all start packing tomorrow morning,’ Isarya requested him.

Aatya went to the forest with his flock. Isari was not in a mood to cook. She felt grieved at the loss of their goats. The children cried as they were hungry. In the afternoon Isari went to fetch water. When she returned she saw Balu waiting for them. His cart had blocked the entrance to their house. Unburdening herself, Isari stood, wiping her face. Balu was staring at her and asked her about Aatya and Isarya. When she told him that they were not at home, he lost his temper and shouted, ‘You wait at my door for hours when you come begging for grains and disappear when the time comes to repay.’

Isari went back to the farm to call Isarya. He came home and greeted Balu, who opened his book of records which said that Aatya had twenty four champas of grains to his debit. Isarya questioned this, saying it was too high a rate of interest for the period of less than a year and argued that even if he charged double the quantity borrowed, it would come only to sixteen champas. Balu was asking for thrice as much as the principle. Balu refused to give in and persisted in saying that he always charged double the quantity for four months and warned that he would make Aatya pay that much. He also threatened to send the Pathan the next day if Aatya failed to repay.

In utter supplication, Isarya pleaded with Balu to give him more time for repayment, to wait at least until the harvest was done. However, an infuriated Balu stormed into the house without removing his shoes. The children, scared by his threatening looks, clung to Isari. He searched every corner, checked every container,

but found nothing except empty earthen pots. Then he turned to the big barrel that contained the corns of nagli that Ziprya and Ravji had stolen. He took out all and ordered Isarya to bring a sack. Isarya kneeled and prayed him to spare the nagli. He also promised to repay from his own stock on behalf of Aatya. Isarya walked ahead with the sack on his back followed by Balu abusing Aatya. He had other dues to clear, but he threshed the nagli afresh in the mortar for Balu who stood there strutting like a perfect lender, counting aloud the bags of nagli so that the neighbours could hear him. Finally, loading sixteen champas of nagli on to the cart, Balu made for Pimpalner.

The next day Ravlya came with a few men, followed by Isarya, Tukya and Ravji. The house was littered with household items put in bundles. Ravlya picked up one and went to Jura's house and put it in the yard. Others followed him with a bundle each but they stood at a distance from Jura's house and unloaded themselves. Ravlya looked back and said, 'I think my brother-in-law will build his house here.'

'No! My children will never stay here. Only I will stay here though I don't like this colony. Drunkards and all! Come brothers, we have to shift everything today. The house must be ready before day break.' Isari brought the basket of rotis to Isarya's house. In Isarya's yard, there was a canopy of grass. Everyone sat down for lunch. Isari and Meeru served roti and curry on teak leaves. Ravlya distributed wine to everyone. As Ravlya gulped the wine, he choked and asked Isari for water since he could not touch the jar. Isari filled a ladle made of gourd with water and poured it in the hollow of his hands. The lunch was over. Everyone staggered under the influence of wine. Murya leaped on to the roof of Aatya's house and threw the grass down. They prepared sheaves and by evening, all belongings were shifted to the new ground. Aatya proceeded to make a pen for the goats. When Manu returned with the goat, they tried to shut the flock in the pen, but being unfamiliar with the new place, the goats very reluctantly entered it. Some fetched water and Isari got back to make the porridge of nagli. She put three stones together to make an oven.

Isarya came home to tell Ziprya and Ravji to go to the new place and work through the night to build the house. He felt worried about Isari and her children. He also suggested that the men should go to

the farm at night and the girls could sleep in the house. Ziprya and Ravji joined Aatya who invited Ravlya to measure the land and prepare the ground plan. With a piece of rope, Ravlya measured the ground and Aatya marked the same with a wooden bell. The others busied themselves with digging holes to erect the structure. Isari whispered into Aatya's ears, 'We have run out of grains. How shall we host the feast for the house warming?' Aatya dismissed the idea. After working the whole night Ziprya and Ravji left for Isarya's house. Aatya told them to bring four champas of grains from Isarya. However, Isari strongly disapproved of the idea of borrowing from Isarya and warned them, 'Let him manage things on his own now. When asked to work on the farm, he runs to Bhilati. He doesn't even look after the flock. The children take the goats for grazing and he goes to the river to enjoy himself. What an idler and a shirker!' Isari cursed Aatya.

In the morning, when Manu took the goats to graze, she served the left over food to Janya, Sunati and Asha and relaxed under the tree, brushing her teeth with a neem stem. Bhavram stayed close to her house. Parbata, his wife, came to her and the two went to fetch water. On the way, Parbata expressed her worry over Isari's health. 'Don't you eat anything? How flat your belly is! You look older than you are,' she remarked to Isari.

'How can I stay young? I *am* an old woman. I have delivered more than ten children. When I sit down to eat, they rush to share my meal. How can I deny them? I have to do with less than what my belly needs. Otherwise, the children would not have survived,' Isari said, unburdening herself.

Isari left the pail of water in the house. Fuming with anger, she pulled Asha away from her breast who still suckled and made for Isarya's house. She had to force her way through the thick undergrowth in the open ground. In those days the farms lay at a distance from the residential colony. A selected few cultivated land. As Isari walked through the tall grass, a hooded snake popped out suddenly. Isari fainted and lay down motionless. Twice swaying its hood, the snake lowered itself and scuttled away. When Isari recovered her consciousness, she joined her hands in prayer, looked up to the sky and said, 'I have lost two of my kids. Was it my child reborn as serpent who came to see me?'



Isari returned home. Little Sunita and Asha rushed to her but she was too fagged out to hold them. She dropped off to sleep under the mahua tree. Isarya came with a small bag of jwar and asked her to grind it and make rotis for the children. She then told him about having seen the snake and asked him about the provision of lunch to the workers who were building the house. Isarya took the responsibility and asked her not to worry. He hoped to see the completion of work by evening and also promised to do the rest, the roof in particular, all by himself. Isari did not forget to instruct him not to take the dirt track as he left for home. When Isari returned home, Parbata came with a bag of bajri and asked her to cook for the children.

Parbata belonged to Bara-pada Chaupala and hailed from a well-to-do family. She had lost her father but her brother was rich and owned a hundred and fifty cows and eight ploughs. She was fair and good-looking but short, and had eyes like that of a monkey, always red. She was the mother of five boys. Bhavram, with a sharp nose, was tall and dark. Isari went to Parbata's house. Everyone had lunch together. The new house was ready by evening.

It was harvest time. Ganpat's son, who was abnormal, was reported missing. After two days, thieves broke into Ganpat's house at night. They fastened his hands and feet with a rope and at the point of a scythe, demanded money. They spoke in Hindi. 'Tell us where the money is. Your father was the chief of the village. We know he made a lot of money,' they shouted at him.

'I don't think my father had that much wealth. Even if he did possess it as you say, I don't know where he has kept it.' Ganpat begged to convince them. Some of them stormed into the house. They snatched away the ornaments Sunita was wearing and ran away. Early morning, when Isarya passed Ganpat's house with his herd of cows, he saw Ganpat fastened to a pillar. When Isarya rushed to him he started crying. He was bleeding. After having unfastened him, Isarya opened the door to rescue Sunita. Her body was swollen, an earlobe torn probably while snatching the earring. Leaning on a stick, Ganpat first went to empty his bowels. In the meantime, Isarya brought a bowl of turmeric powder. He then applied the warm turmeric paste to the bruises on Sunita and Ganpat's body. The scars made by the stick and the scythe looked yellow. Ganpat looked

depressed. 'Go and call the young boys from the colony to the other side with their carts. I am not going to stay here any longer,' he requested Isarya, 'my farm is close to the residential unit. It is surrounded by houses. I will go there and stay with the Bhisas. Tell them I am going to offer a billy goat to them.' He had made up his mind to leave this place.

Isarya went to the village and gave the message to all. All those who owned a bullock cart came rushing. Those who did not have one brought men with them. With their help Ganpat shifted to his new residence within a short time. On arrival he appealed to the people, 'Both of us are injured and upset. We are unable to prepare lunch for you. I will give you two goats; one for shifting and the other for building my house. On the last day there will be wine too.'

Several hands joined to build Ganpat's house. Women and children also extended a hand by carrying soil. Within eight days the house was ready. On the last day after completing the task, they went to the river for a bath. Ravlya, Phulya and Motya took mahua flowers from Ganpat to make wine. Finally, they gathered under a banyan tree and butchered the goats. Each one had his share of mutton. Some parts were cooked there. Then wine was distributed. Nearly everyone was intoxicated, drinking peg after peg.. The women did not drink. Instead, they collected the wine in earthen pots . Sukya announced that they must finish the entire stock of wine and if they could not drink it all, they must carry the rest home. When completely out of their senses, they started raving like madmen. Just then Isarya stepped forward and asked them to go home. He also instructed Ravlya to throw away the remaining wine.

Taking the master's share of mutton, Aatya came to Ganpat's house. Sunita sat listless, without an upper garment. The throbbing pain and the scars made it difficult for her to wear a blouse. Locks of entangled hair hung loose. That she was beaten black and blue was evident. Her torn earlobe looked like a piece of roti. Ganpat, groaning in unbearable pain, made himself comfortable in a makeshift swing of cloth that Isarya had made for him. Aatya helped him get off the swing and he sat down. Sunita came crawling. With a bleeding bottom, Ganpat found it difficult to sit. Aatya served them meat. Ganpat was apprehensive about eating meat in such a condition. But Aatya assured his uncle that it was safe to eat goat's meat. Ganpat

was worried about defecating since neither of them could walk. However, Aatya dismissed the fear by volunteering to clean everything. Ganpat and Sunita went to bed and Aatya returned home. Isari was waiting for him. The children had already gone to bed. 'Why did you wait for me? You could have served them,' he said.

'In fact they asked for food but I told them that we would have dinner together after you came home. They had a drink and dropped off to sleep,' she told him.

Isari went in to awaken Janya, Manu, Sunita and Asha. She served them mutton and roti on palash leaves. Aatya and Isari had their meal and drank wine. Aatya told her about the burglary in Ganpat's house and suggested that she should visit them next morning. He also instructed her to bathe Sunita, change her clothes and also to wash their soiled clothes. Aatya's tender feelings for Ganpat and Sunita welled up for they were all he had since he lost his parents. He then spoke to Isari about the proposal for Isarya's daughter from a member of the colony. But Isari was doubtful since she did not know the family. She reported to him that the women of that colony never talked to her and that they did not wear blouses despite the fact that they were rich and owned large pieces of land.

Since that tragic incident, Isari and Aatya visited Ganpat and his wife regularly and served them in every possible way.

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## The Thief

Isarya was busy settling the marriage of his younger daughter, Gunti. Barkya, his wife Shipati, and brother Rupa came to negotiate the terms. Finally, they agreed upon a dowry of hundred and fifty rupees, a wedding feast for the village, sixty rupees for wine and a sari and blouse for the bride. The wedding was to be performed within three days, on Sunday. Barkya invited women to help with the preparations. They pounded rice and *bhadla* within a day. Preparations gathered momentum in Isarya's house too. Gaju, Gunti, Meeru, Nathi and Isari contributed towards gathering food provisions. Isarya went to Pimpalner on Sunday morning. He purchased a sari and blouse for Gunti and silver jewellery weighing one kilogram. Phatya, the groom, went around the village with the special offering to god. Isarya was worried about thefts. Most of his neighbours had already shifted to other places. So he suggested that his people would not stay overnight for the dance and song. He wanted to return immediately after the wedding. Ziprya went to Bhilati to call Aatya. He came with ten men to Isarya's house. Isari also came to his house. Isarya assigned duties to everyone. All the Mavchis went to Barkya's house since they strongly condemned Aatya's connection with a woman from the Bhil community. Isarya instructed Meeru to hurry with the rite of applying turmeric paste to the bride. But the women from the groom's side were yet to arrive. Meeru brought the bowl of turmeric paste. They circled Gunti and each one rubbed the paste over her body; first came the members of her family, followed by the village folk. Isarya then asked Gunti to put on her new dress and proceed for the formal worship of the local deity. He further advised Ziprya and Ravji to carry wine and the mat.

Gunti sat on Bitty's shoulders. He was handsome, fair and strongly built. As he walked with Gunti on his shoulders, beads of perspiration ran down his face. Phulya beat the drum. He was dark

and fat. He bent himself to beat the drum. His dark skin, wet with sweat, glistened. Daji turned to his pipe. Women sang songs. Women in Gunti's family wore blue and red saris. Those from the Bhil community wore a dotted piece of red cloth.

Ziprya spread the rough carpet under the apata tree for Gunti. Ravlya cleared a patch of ground around the trunk of the tree, washing it with cowdung to prepare it for worship. Gunti stood facing the sun. Ravlya mumbled something and handed a fistful of rice to her. She worshipped the tree and scattered the rice. Then she offered a palash leaf and wine. People drank the left over wine. Once again, Bittyta lifted Gunti and started dancing. The procession marched ahead. Meeru went forward to receive the bride with aarati. Scattering the rice over the groom's people, she applied *kumkum* to everyone. Bittyta, with Gunti seated on his hips now, entered the house. Isarya invited people who were still dancing outside, to lunch. He was in a hurry to return home before it got dark. He had decided to see his daughter off while the sun still shone, before returning back. But Ravlya insisted on following the custom of dancing the whole night. However, Isarya was anxious about the safety of his house. That was the reason for organising the wedding during daytime. He tried to convince Ravlya, who kept resisting the idea. In a fit of anger, Ravlya snatched the drum from Phulya and walked off. Isarya and Aatya rushed to him and entreated him apologetically to carry on for some more time, until the final farewell of his daughter was done.

'Listen to me,' Ravlya persisted. 'Promise me that you will not say 'no'. We are young and you can't stop us from having fun. We will return home as you say but we shall dance in your yard the whole night. What do you say?' Ravlya would not give in so easily. Isarya had no alternative but to agree with him to avoid a tussle.

The drum started beating again. Boys and girls resumed their dance and song. Holding each other's hands they formed a circle and danced in frenzy. The girls started teasing Isarya, Meeru and Tukya through their songs:

Fie upon thee, bride's father  
A coward and none other!  
Afraid of our people and our place  
Back to home you race!

Fie upon thee, bride's uncle  
 A coward and none other!  
 Dance and song our custom  
 Sure in fear you bungle.  
 Fie upon thee, bride's mother  
 A chicken and none other!  
 Age-old customs our dear  
 Why in fear you sear.

Ravlya stopped beating the drum and started to smoke. Others preferred this interval and relaxed. This was enough to get the girls started with another song:

Gone is the drummer and silent the drum,  
 Drunken is he and dumb his drum.  
 The piper is fagged out and quiet his pipe,  
 Drunken is he and hushed his pipe.  
 Gone are the drummer, the piper and the dancer.

Isarya intervened to invite his people to lunch and requested them not to keep the groom and his people waiting. He was eager to pack up and leave.

It was time to leave. They put the bullocks to the cart. The bullocks had their share of luxury, a string of bells around their neck and a decorative piece of frilled cloth on the back. Isarya covered his head with a red turban leaving the other end loose on the back. Dressed in a black coat and full length white dhoti, he got on to the cart and took his seat. Tukya lifted Gunti and placed her in the cart. Meeru could not keep back her tears. Ravlya and Bitty led the procession accompanied with music. As he pulled the reins, the bullocks sped and stopped only at the open, especially decorated, shed of the groom. Isarya got off and unleashed the bullocks. Phatya, the groom came forward to lift Gunti, the bride. Ravlya's wife stopped him to ask, 'You will not have the beautiful bride without a price. What will you give? You can't take her unless you promise.'

'Auntie, I will give you a goat,' said the groom.

She allowed Phatya to take the bride. Holding each other's hand, the bride and the groom stood at the centre. The boys and girls from both sides danced in circles. Musicians played in the middle of the

shed. The groom's people dragged the people from the other side. Phatya and Gunti sat in the baskets of rice. The loose ends of their shawls were tied together. They applied oil to Gunti's hair and strung a garland on the braid. She was offered half a coconut. Then they all came out leaving the couple there. Next, they proceeded one by one to greet the bride and offered her a coin. Women thronged around Gunti. Isarya pulled them over and asked Phatya to take charge of Gunti. He lifted her on his shoulders and carried her to the door of his house. Phatya's sister stopped them from entering the house. She allowed them to enter only after getting the promise that he would give away his first child to her; if a daughter, she would get her married to her son and if a son, he would marry her daughter and stay in her house as son-in-law. Phatya escorted Gunti into the house.

Isarya returned home with all the men and women who had come for the wedding. No sooner had he reached the yard than Meeru cried in the pain of separation. 'Though Gunti has left our house, she is not far away from us as Ambu is,' Isarya consoled her.

Once again there was dance and song throughout the night. At dawn everyone had *bhagar* for breakfast and then left Isarya's house in a state of intoxication.

Isari and Meeru swept the house and the yard. Isarya asked Isari to stay on for a day. 'We shall have meat for the feast,' he said to her. But Isari did not appreciate the idea. 'We have just seen our daughter off. How can you think of such a thing? O, how I miss her!' She took him to task. Isari and Aatya walked off with the children. Isarya knew that there was hardly anything in her house to feed the children, so he gave her a bag of *bhagar* before she left.

Isari got up early in the morning and got busy with the domestic chores. As she swept the house, Parbata came with a pitcher full of *bajara* for Isari. Isari felt embarrassed and informed Parbata that Isarya had given her enough *bhagar*. When Isari told her that they had all gone for the wedding she felt worried that there was none to watch over the house. She added that her husband would have stayed there for the night, if he had known. 'My grand-daughters will arrive today from Nandurbar. You must visit my house and help me with the preparations,' she requested Isari.

Isari went to Parbata's house. As she was alone in the house, the

cooking was delayed considerably. Isari became hungry and climbed the peeper tree and picked peeper. The children from the Bhil community were hanging on to the branches of the tree. Bhavram spotted them from a distance and called out to Parbata in fear. 'Look at them, hanging from the branches. If someone falls and dies even by accident, the Bhils will lock me up. Drive them away,' he shouted at her. As soon as Isari heard his voice, she climbed down. Bhavram pretended that he had not seen Isari and made for the farm. Parbata followed him carrying his lunch. In the evening they returned home. Parabta served roti to everyone as Bhavram had instructed her. But Isari was reluctant to eat anything cooked by her. 'Aunty, in our community only virgins can eat what *you* cook. I am a married woman and I cannot eat anything of what you have prepared,' she said.

'Do you still believe in these conventions? Moreover, even if you eat I am not going to tell the world about it,' Parbata tried to persuade her. They had lunch and relaxed. Daji came home with his herd. There were no less than seventy nanny goats, all black and strong. On seeing Isari, Daji shied away and sat among the goats. Parbata coaxed him but he would not come forward. She told him about Isari but he refused to come in. She served him food in the yard then. Parbata came to Isari and requested her to look for lice in her hair. Everytime Isari skillfully crushed the lice with her fingers, a tiny sound was heard; she spat after every shot. Parabata was overwhelmed with Isari's help. 'Who would have done it for me? No woman from the Bhilati comes here, you know. By the way did you get married in your own village?' she asked Isari.

Isari knew that the entire Bhilati looked upon Parbata as a witch. However, she did not want to talk about it. 'There was no proper wedding as such. Along with Ambu, they gave me a turmeric wash and my father sold me for a basket of kulith. Here is your comb. I have killed all the lice. We have to pound rice before I get back home,' she said to Parbata.

Isari returned home with her share of pounded rice, mixed with stones. As the sun rose she started cleaning the rice. Aatya was asleep. 'Will you get up now?' she shouted at him, 'Go and prepare the ground with cowdung wash for the harvest. How dare you lie in bed till daybreak? There is nothing in the house to eat.' She lost no



opportunity to take Aatya to task.

Aatya got up and went to Isarya's house right away. He was taken aback to see Isarya in chains. He was tied to a column and broke down on seeing Aatya. The women were shut up in the house. He rushed to unfasten Isarya and then went to see Tukya whose condition was not different from that of Isarya. His hands and feet were tied with a rope and he lay on the floor. Aatya unfastened him too. Just then Aatya heard screams from the farm. Ziprya and Ravji were shouting for help. Aatya ran to them.

'Why were you screaming?' asked Aatya. 'Do you think we are mad? Look at us. The thieves beat us and carried away all the threshed grains,' they reported. They all returned home; Ziprya and Ravji limping behind Aatya. They were astounded and sat quietly, thinking. This was not all. Now Gunti came crying and threw herself on the ground. Groaning in pain, Isarya went in to see her. 'Why are you crying? Look at us, we have been robbed of everything. Gaju and her mother have lost their jewellery. The stock of grocery reserved for you has been stolen. Moreover, we have lost three goats,' Isarya shared his agony.

'The thieves broke into our house too. They snatched all my ornaments. When my mother-in-law refused to give them her chain, they tried to strangle her. She lay half-dead on the ground. They did not spare Phatya either. He was beaten severely. Those who attacked us were all dark faced,' Gunti cried as she narrated her story.

Isarya went to see his daughter's father-in-law. He sat in the yard moaning, with the bark of palash wrapped around his head. After attending to him, Isarya turned to Shipati who lay listless. He called out to her but there was no response. He returned home and told Meeru to prepare porridge and instructed Gunti to take it home. He proceeded to send a message to all, through Bhavram. Some came with their bullock carts. They helped carry the belongings of all, turn by turn, to Aatya's house, to Isarya, Tukya, Barkya, Manjarya and Miraji. The next day, construction work was undertaken. The walls rose one after another. Aatya went to Karanji to fetch Jambu.

Ambu was pregnant and everyone was busy with harvest on the farm. Aatya greeted them all. Kagadya asked Ambu to go home and instructed others to thresh all the rice and carry it home. He wanted to treat Aatya with wine. The two left in search of wine.

Ambu came home. Surya took out a basketful of rice and she got back to pound it. He went to fetch water and made five rounds. Ambu had done with the rice and Surya asked her to cook rice and dal. He knew that there was no adequate quantity of meat for sixteen people. He asked her to prepare a dish of meat only for Aatya. Kagadya and Aatya had had their drinks and returned home, followed by a cart full of rice threshed by the men. They had lunch together. After lunch Aatya told them about the burglary.

At dawn, Aatya was warming himself by the fireside. Ambu joined him for a chat. 'I will come home with you,' she said. 'No one came to see me and take me home after the wedding. The harvest is over now and I wish to visit them all.' She longed to go with Aatya.

'Darling, you are pregnant. There is a lot of bustle in the village. I don't want to put you to any inconvenience. You are happy where you are. When you deliver the baby I will come and take you home,' Aatya persuaded her.

Ambu wrapped lunch for Aatya and Jambu. Kagadya handed over a bundle of rice and *tuar* dal. When the two set off, Ambu walked a mile with them with tearful eyes. Jambu was dark, short and lean but quite attractive with big eyes and long hair. When she did her hair in a bun, her head and the bun looked similar in size. When the two sisters, Ambu and Jambu, walked side by side, Aatya described them as morning and evening. Jambu always suffered from stomach ache. Aatya did not want Ambu to follow them any further so he paused and embraced her. She was weeping all the way. He tried to console her with great difficulty and got going. Ambu watched them until the two figures disappeared behind the hill. By evening Aatya and Jambu reached their village. People were still in the grip of fear. He took Jambu to Ganpat's house.

The next morning he went to see Isarya and Tukya. The walls of the house were ready. He proceeded to fix the roof. They sat down for lunch in the new house. Just then Balu, the grocer, came in his cart. He asked Isarya for Aatya's house. When Isarya pointed out to him, he went to Aatya's house, parked his cart and blasted Isari, 'Where is Aatya?' When she told him that he had gone to Isarya's house, he lost his temper since he had just come from there. He sent her to fetch Aatya. When Isari came to Isarya's house, Aatya was rolling his cigarette. He had just had his lunch. 'Come with me,' she shouted.

‘That devil is waiting for you. He has come to recover his dues, sacks of rice.’

Aatya was shaking with fear and requested Isarya to come with him. Isarya refused to go but he told Aatya to promise Balu that he would settle all the dues himself. Aatya came home and entreated Balu to wait for some time. He also told him that Isarya had taken the responsibility of repayment on his behalf. But Balu refused to be convinced. ‘To hell with your promises! I want my grains,’ he insisted. ‘Only thieves can bring you around. I wish they had beaten you to death. Come on Aatya. Show me your goat-pen. I have no time. I want to see Ganpat’s bull. He has invited me.’ Balu had planned everything in advance. Aatya, followed by Balu, walked towards the shed. But on second thought Balu sent him back. On reaching the shed, he started talking to the children, enquiring about the number of cows and bulls they had. He called Manu and asked him about his father. The children started giggling instead and signalled to each other. Doubly irritated by this gesture, he raved, ‘You ugly brats! Why are you giggling? Do I look like a fool?’

‘No sir! They are laughing because I am not telling my father’s name. I am Manu, Aatya’s son. These cows and bulls belong to my uncles. The goats beyond are ours. We have only one cow, the one who is feeding the calf,’ he pointed out to the particular cow.

‘Manu, take this rope and rein in the cow. I will go and get my cart. You bring the cow to the road,’ Balu ordered Manu. He then came back to Aatya’s house, took his cart and drove back. Manu was waiting for him round the corner with the cow and the calf. He fastened them to the rear frame of the cart and rode fast to Pimpalner.

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## Divorce

Isari was preparing the evening meal when Janya came running with an empty bowl in his hands. 'Mama, Aaba refused to give me milk,' he complained to her. She called Manu and asked him to give milk to Janya. Manu did not know how to tell her the truth. Somehow he gathered strength and told her that Balu, the grocer, had confiscated their cow. Isari rushed out, beating her chest half in anger and half in grief. 'That damned grocer has taken away the cow, depriving my children of milk, do you know?' she cursed Aatya for it.

Aatya explained to her how it was Balu's dirty plan to rob them of their belongings. Isari cried to hear it and ran to Isarya who consoled her and sent her back. That very night, Aatya got ill suddenly and there were no signs of his recovery. For two days they did everything the priest told them to do, but their effort were rendered fruitless. Presuming that he was dead, Ravlya sent for Daji, Bhavram's son. He asked Daji to fetch Ambu and Devji from Karanji.

By afternoon Daji reached Ambu's house. Ambu was a nursing mother for less than two months now. Her face beamed up to see Daji, 'You must have started quite early. Look, you are already here by afternoon.' She offered him a glass of water and invited him to breakfast.

'Forget it. We have to get back home immediately. Your father is seriously ill and we can't afford to waste time. I have come to take you and Devji. Where is he?' he asked her.

Ambu ran to the farm and returned with Devji. She packed the morning meal in a piece of cloth. Devji picked up her new born baby and tied it onto his back with a piece of rag. Daji and Devji set off instantly, quickening their steps. Ambu had to run to keep pace with them. She almost fainted with exhaustion and sat down. Daji halted for loo and resumed his walk. He turned back to ensure that Ambu was following them but there was no trace of her. He now called

Devji and the two stopped. After some time Ambu appeared, tired and pressing her belly with one hand. 'Hurry up. Why are you lagging behind? We must reach home before it gets dark. Try to understand,' Devji said to her in an encouraging tone.

'Brother, I have severe pain in the stomach and I am feeling giddy too,' she answered.

'Oh, don't worry, but we have to hurry. I know it is not even two months since you delivered the baby. You will have your meal when we reach the river. I understand how difficult it is to walk on an empty stomach,' he sounded warm.

Ambu looked utterly pale and her big eyes made the whiteness look grim. As they approached the river, they halted for lunch. Devji unfastened the baby and put it down in the sand. Immediately after lunch they resumed their journey. Five miles more to go! They trudged their way and reached their village by midnight.

Everyone waited for them by the fireside. Ambu collapsed to see Aatya lying there. Warming her up, they tried to restore her to consciousness. She opened her eyes but could not speak. Isarya came forward to address all, 'No one shall shed tears now. His body is still warm, so I decided to wait until dawn.'

After a long interval, Ambu found her voice. She whispered in Isari's ears and asked her how it had happened. Isari told her that he had left early that morning with the fodder for goats and hens and had become ill suddenly since then. 'That is why I sent for you. Come, we will lie down beside him tonight.' Isari said to Ambu. They retired into the room and lay down beside Aatya. Others made themselves comfortable in the yard. Isarya and Ravlya slept by the door.

The shrill cry of the rooster broke the silence of the early hours of morning and a scream was heard. Aatya was crying, 'My cow, my cow!' He ran out. Isarya and Ravji leaped forward to catch him. Isari woke up and with the fire of the night still burning, lit the oven. They brought Aatya back and helped him sit near the hearth. His face was darkened and eyes reddened. Totally unaware of what had happened he asked why so many people had gathered in his house. He then narrated to them what dream he had dreamt: 'I saw two young men with big teeth carrying me away. There appeared another man who was upset on seeing me and ordered the two to carry me

back. He gave me a fistful of charmed rice. The two drove me back and kicked me on the way. The rice in my hand scattered all over the ground and I woke up.'

After listening to the story of his dream, they all went home. Aatya stared at Ambu. It took some time for him to recognise her. Once he was back to his senses, he realised the seriousness of the matter and was relieved to see himself alive. He gathered Ambu in his arms and cried, 'My little darling, but for the grace of god I would not be talking to you here today.' Ambu too was overwhelmed and consoled him. She then rushed to her baby who was crying and sat down feeding it. Aatya was sitting close by. Janya, Sunati and Asha too sat by her side watching Aatya. He looked at the trio and asked Ambu who they were. He did not recognise them. Ambu was surprised and explained to him.

Everyone had left except Jura. Ambu invited her to come in. Aatya had his meal along with all the children. Isari served food to Jura who accepted it after a lot of coaxing. She retired into a corner and ate quietly. Devji had had his meal with Isarya. When they were all relaxing over a chat, Jura came to Isari and asked for tobacco. She was pregnant and was counting down. Just a few days left for her to deliver the child! Heavy with weight, she had to press her hands on the ground to lift herself. One could see the green nerves puffed out and tightly stretched across her belly. She packed the tobacco into a knot of her pallu and was ready to leave. 'Jura, I will come in the morning. Tell Ravlya to stay at home,' Aatya said to her before she left.

Isarya came with a bundle of rice to Isari. He cared for all children and took it upon himself to provide for them. 'Ask Devji to stay on for a day. We will have a feast of meat for all who helped build the house. Ambu has come for the first time after her marriage. Let us pamper her too.' He said to her and left. Isari reminded him of the new piece of dhoti he had left behind. 'That is for my brother-in-law. Keep it. The vest and the sari are at home. I have sent Daji to collect it. It was Aatya's good fortune that he escaped death. Let him wear this dhoti. Do bring Ambu to my house before she leaves,' he added.

Devji, Ziprya and Ravji went to the river to make wine. Gaju, Meeru and Isari busied themselves with getting the grains and grocery ready to cook. Isarya, Tukya and Aatya came home with goat meat.

The oven was ready. In a big vessel they cooked rice. Aatya went to the colony and invited one person from every house to dinner. Isarya instructed all to quickly serve food to guests. He also ordered a few young boys to distribute wine. Isarya wished that Shipati had joined the dinner but somebody reported that she was ill and had stopped taking any solid food for the last three days.

Only four Bhil families lived in that area. The rest of the eight families who were beaten by the thieves belonged to the Mavchi tribe. Dinner was over. Those who served the guests had their dinner at the end. When people left for their homes the host and his family helped themselves with dinner. Devji guarded Isari's house while she came with all the children and Ambu for dinner. Gaju came with Gunti. After dinner Ziprya escorted Aatya, Isari, Ambu and the kids to their house. It was dark. He lit the dried twigs of ambadi. As soon as they arrived, Aatya threw himself on the floor at the door and dropped off to sleep. At dawn a cold breeze woke him. He made a fire and sat warming himself. Isari and Ambu joined him. This was Ambu's first visit to her parents after marriage. She had little things to share with them all.

'Aai, how cool is the weather here! There it is boiling hot. In summer, no one sleeps inside. They pull their charpoys in the backyard or under the tree. In the rainy season it pours, like a horse urinating. There is water everywhere. When they shiver in the cold weather around this time, I can easily put up with the cold and wear minimum clothes. They are surprised. I must say that they eat good food; rice-eaters they all are! Nevertheless, they lack our strength. We are roti-eaters, we eat rotis of *savarbarati*. Both of us are Mavchis, but what a contrast! We will always beat them in our strength of resistance. How cold it is here and how sultry over there! Aaba, last night we had meat. Now go and bring fish.' Ambu liked to be pampered.

'Why not? My dear daughter! This year the children had a lot of fish. Sometimes, when there was no roti, they had only fish. I will surely go fishing. If you are lucky, you will have fish today,' Aatya responded.

Ambu led the flock to the fold. She took Suniti and Asha with her. Janya, who was sitting on a boulder, shivering, came running to her and said, 'Sister, when you return to your in-laws' house I will come

with you. Those ruffians beat me here and uncle too, when the goats disappear. Auntie too abuses me.' With tears in his eyes, he entreated Ambu. She gathered him in her arms and wiped away the sparkling drops of tears on his dark cheeks. 'Let her abuse. You should not think of it. You will have your day. We would not have been thrown at the mercy of others if our parents had enough to take care of us,' she sympathised with him. 'Hey, run and control the flock and take them to the fold before they get unruly and ramble about in the farm,' she instructed Janya.

Isari wrapped herself in a torn sari and went to Isarya. He was weaving a rope. 'There is nothing to eat in the house. How can I let my daughter starve? Give me four kilograms of grains.' Isarya signalled to Ziprya and Ravaji who were packing nagli in the other room. Ravaji handed over a basketful of nagli to Isari and she made for her house. Meeru who had overheard something came out and took Isarya to task, 'Who was it? It must be Isari. You must have given her nagli. Didn't you?'

Back at home, without wasting time, Isari and Ambu got back to cooking. They first ground the nagli in the grinding stone to prepare flour. Ambu was used to it. She wondered at the capacity of this grinding stone in her mother's house. How easy to operate, as compared to the one in her in-laws' house, she thought. Ambu was making rotis when Aatya returned with fish and instructed Isari to boil water. As he shook the bamboo stack, the fish fell into the hot water and died. Changing the water, Isari and Ambu cleaned the fish and put them in the pan. Ambu had roasted fish without curry that day. Isari packed a few in the palash leaves for Isarya and Tukya and sent the parcel with Devji. Isarya had a pleasant surprise and he handed over the same to Meeru. Everyone in Isari's house enjoyed fish that day. They had to make fire to search for the fish bones. She was careful in such matters when the children were involved. Aatya rested in the yard warming himself by the fire. Just then Isarya came, wrapped in a rough *kambal*, stamping the stick all the way. 'Brother, Gunti's mother-in-law is no more. Gunti is still a young girl. How will she shoulder the responsibility of the entire family?' Isarya was worried. He suggested that Ambu and Devji should leave early in the morning. He had to go to Gunti's house and expected to spend the night over there.



On seeing Isarya and Aatya, Barkya came out and started crying. 'Take it easy, my boy. The dead will not return. Nor will your tears bring her back.' Isarya tried his best to provide solace. Women came from every house. No one sent a message to Shipati's parents. Phatya bought a sari and a blouse. The other things such as turmeric powder, kumkum and small earthen pots were kept ready. Women bathed Shipati and wrapped her in new clothes. The charpoy was kept for her in the yard. Gunti brought two plates of rice and jaggery. Isarya addressed the crowd, 'Don't cry any more.' He then instructed Barkya to apply kumkum to Shipati. She had lost her life due to her madness for jewellery. But women will never learn a lesson. They continue to crave for jewellery even though it is risky to wear. The corpse was now moved to the charpoy. There was a roar of sighs and cries. Isarya once again came forward to give a piece of advice to all, 'Don't tell anyone that the thieves beat her to death. If anyone enquires, say that she died of illness.' The men lifted the charpoy and the funeral procession went ahead for burial. The women, in tears, followed the dead Shipati up to a point and then returned home and took bath. Shipati was given a burial and the men returned home after bathing. Barkya distributed wine to all. They poured the wine at the spot where she had breathed her last and then dispersed.

Isarya called Tukya and advised him to help Gunti and the family. He did not forget to remind him of all that Shipati had done for them in the absence of their parents. They owed a lot to her. But for her timely assistance they would not have survived, he knew. Tukya promised to help. But his wife was a selfish woman, always throwing tantrums for the smallest charity on his part. He said, 'You take away all the children to help you. Leave at least one for me,' added Tukya.

'I am already short of hands. Why don't you employ Janya? He is grown up now and can handle the herd or call Sunita,' Isarya suggested.

'That is a good idea. I have three daughters. Two will stay at home. I will ask Janya to join me.' Tukya seemed relieved. He went home and told his wife about the plan. She did not approve of it and threw tantrums. He turned to Heera, his elder daughter, asked for some grains and took the bag of grains to Isari. He shared with her his discussion with Isarya and returned home with Janya. He washed his hands and waited for his wife to serve him roti. He then asked

for it but she blasted him saying he should make his own roti. She fretted over Tukya's charity to his sister and his nephews. 'Give away everything to your sister and her children and then beg for your piece of roti,' she rebuked him. This was the limit of Tukya's endurance. He could not take it lying down. He rushed at her with a stick and beat her mercilessly. Nathi and her daughters started crying. The noise attracted Isarya to their house. He asked Tukya what the row was about. When he learnt the reason, he too abused Nathi and justified Tukya's violence against them. He did not forget to remind Nathi that it was his sister, Isari, and her husband who had brought them up. 'She is not only our sister but she has been a mother to us. What has she not done for us? Without her, we would not have survived.' Isarya warned her and went back with Janya. Tukya sat in his charpoy. Nathi came to him with roti. 'I am sorry. I was wrong,' she apologised.

Harvest was in full swing. Gaju, Isari and Aatya went to the farm. They winnowed the threshed jwar and separated the chaff from the grain. Aatya sent for Isarya who then divided the entire quantity equally among the three. He gave one part to Isari and kept two for himself. Aatya and Isari came home and opened the bundle. Twelve champas of jwar was their share. They looked at each other with wonder. 'He cultivated our own land and has given us a share as one gives to a labourer. Why, he could have given us half of it,' Aatya said to her.

'Why do you think like that? After all, he is the one who helped us keep our body and soul together for all these days,' Isari justified Isarya.

Next day on Isari's instructions, Aatya went to Bhavram's farm. On the way he thought of Jambu. So he took a detour to Ganpat's house. Jambu was heating Bhavrams's back with a pad of goat shit when he arrived. She asked him to help her with it. After fastening the pad to his back; Aatya left for Bhavram's farm. Bhavram was having his lunch. Parbata served lunch to Aatya and broke the news that Jura had delivered a baby boy. Aatya got back to work. Daji and Parbata joined him. Parbata filled the baskets and passed them on to Aatya who stood on the pier. Daji swept away the chaff. It was quite windy so they finished winnowing the bajari faster. Daji brought the cart and the sacks were loaded on to it. Boys from Bhilati came and

sat watching the entire process. Bhavram asked Aatya and Daji to give the boys their *ira* as was the custom. 'Ganpat's father always sent us our *ira*. Whatever we grow for the year, we must share it with our people,' Bhavram said.

As the fully loaded cart entered the yard of Bhavram's house, Mura, Daji's wife received them with aarti. She worshipped the bullocks and applied kumkum to all. They too did the same. She then washed the feet of the bullocks with water. This was followed by an act of burning pure ghee around the cart. The sacks of grain went to the store room. Parbata told Aatya to send Isari the next day to collect her *ira*.

The next morning Isari, after having porridge, went to Bhavram's house. She covered her torn blouse with her sari. When she reached his house, Parbata and her daughter-in-law were grinding grains. On seeing her Parbata got up and offered Isari her share of grains. Isari had nothing to collect them in. She spread out the pallu of her sari to collect the grains throwing open her breasts, hanging out of the holes in the blouse. Parbata was touched and gave Isari her used blouse. She could not suppress her anger at Aatya and abused him, 'What kind of a husband is he? He can't even provide his wife with a piece of cloth to cover her body and dares to marry for the second time. How pretty Isari would look if she had a simple sari and blouse to cover her body!' she thus expressed her sympathy for Isari.

Parbata gave Isari some roti which she wrapped in her pallu and walked home, leaving her upper body exposed to the daylight. She distributed the roti among her children. However, Asha threw it away and clung to her mother and sucked at her breast. Isari ate the left over, put on the blouse given by Parbata and went to the farm with the tiffin. She was relieved to see Aatya working on Bhavram's farm. She went to Isarya's farm. She informed Ziprya and Ravji about the *ira* and the blouse Parbata had given her.

They both warned her to keep it a secret fearing that people of their tribe would abuse her for wearing a blouse given by a Bhil woman.

'I don't care,' cried Isari, 'aren't they human beings like you and me? Haven't they got a body as clean as ours?' she asked in desperation.

'Aai, go home and take it off. We feel ashamed of it. Wear your

own, though torn.’ they requested.

‘Buy a blouse for me then. You can’t, I know. Don’t you think we are more defiled than the Bhils? We abhor them because they eat dead cattle. But we too drink the milk and consume the fat of a living cow. In what way are we superior to them? Tell me. Ever since we came to stay here, they have helped us. We owe our survival to them,’ Isari commented.

Ziprya and Ravji finished their work, loaded the cart with grains and other things and came home. When Isarya returned home he instructed the two of them to keep the stack of wood ready for the night. He informed them that he had heard of thieves pelting stones in the upper colony. He was thinking of making fire at night to keep the thieves away. The thieves did come that night. Voices were heard from both the sides. In response to the thieves’ loud cries, Rodya’s voice was heard from the upper colony. Ravlya, Murya, Phulya and Daji, who were on alert, called out and marched in that direction. When they reached the house there was a volley of stones. They stepped back and kept shouting. The voices from the other side stopped. Ravlya and Phulya collected garbage and lit a fire. Some sat by the side of the fire while others kept feeding the fire with more garbage. The light of the fire protected them from the thieves. They remained awake throughout the night.

The next morning, Isarya, Aatya and Ravlya visited the colony. When people heard their voices, they closed the doors. Isarya went to Rodya’s house and knocked on the door. There was no response. Isarya called out, ‘It’s me, the chief of the village. Please open the door.’

On hearing Isarya’s voice, the doors opened, one after another. Isarya gave them instructions that the young members of all the families should keep the stacks of wood ready for the night. He assured them that he would invite the youth from the other colony to join them. He planned to make a fire and keep awake through the night in the open ground. He also asked them to send the women folk and children to the farm and to lock their houses at night. He advised the men to take refuge in the big pit. After giving these instructions Isarya and Aatya returned home. They piled the wood. They also made a pit in the ground, big enough to accommodate thirty to forty people at a time. Late in the afternoon, they carried all their valuable

things, packed with utmost safety, to the pit. As it got dark, women and children came and slept in the pit. Two men stayed with them for protection. Others left for the village and made fire. However, Isarya sent them back. When it was utterly dark, stones started raining in. People shouted aloud and ran towards the fire, equipped with knives, sticks and axes. Now the stones changed their direction. They fell near the fire. People ran back to their houses and kept shouting. Now the thieves ran away.

For eight days they continued with this exercise and were happy to think that the thieves would not dare to come again. They brought home their valuable belongings and started sleeping in their houses. But the thieves made their appearance on the ninth day. People were trapped in their houses. They could not send out any message. Four houses were attacked and the inmates robbed of their belongings. The fifth house belonged to Subhya. He kept shouting at the top of his voice. Finally, the thieves broke open the door and stormed in. They started beating Subhya. Subhya would not give in. He lifted one up and hurled the thief on the ground. Angered by this, the thief drew his sword and tried to hit Subhya on the neck. Subhya dodged and escaped the fatal injury but lost his right hand. He fell to the ground, unconscious. The thieves ran away with whatever they could from his house. Seeing Subhya lying on the ground, people cried for help. Isarya could not stop himself and rushed to Bhilati despite Meeru's opposition. He informed them and they all went to see Subhya. He was surrounded by people. Subhya started wailing aloud. 'Why did you sleep in the house? I had warned you to sleep on the farm,' Isarya criticised them.

Isarya went home with Ravlya. He returned with a reed in which antelope fat was stored. They tried to fix Subhya's arm with the support of this reed but in vain. Except for a small area of the skin that connected the arm to the shoulder, the massive damage had unscrewed the arm from the pit. The pain was unbearable for Subhya. 'Take me to the hospital. I wish I were dead rather than suffer all this.' His miserable condition looked beyond repair and he raved in pain. On Isarya's instructions, they got the cart ready. Four of them lifted Subhya and placed him in the cart. Subhya was dark, short and fat, snub nosed and wore a khadi vest and loin cloth. His wife sat by his side. She had taken a big copper pail wrapped in a sari with her. She

held his hand. The journey was arduous for Subhya since the road was bumpy, marked by holes and stones. The cart went slowly but Subhya writhed in pain all the way. Others walked behind the cart.

The next day, late in the morning, they reached Pimpalner. They had to go to Dhule by bus. Making room on the frontside seats they helped him lie down. He was then admitted to the government hospital at Dhulia. He had to wait in a queue for three days to have a doctor examine him. They administered a tetanus injection and gave some tablets. They informed him that the hand would be fixed with stitches after three days. The doctor stitched his hand without administering any anesthetic drug. He cried his heart out during the entire operation. Isarya and Ravlya wanted to leave now when Subhya prompted his wife to offer them some money to cover the travelling expenses. She told him that she had given twenty rupees to them. That was all that she had.

The five families decided to shift their residence. They removed everything and came to the central part of the village. Construction of houses was their priority. Within five days they could erect the walls of five houses. Subhya returned from the hospital after one and half months and arranged a feast for the entire village. There was meat for all. Days passed and there was a rumour in the village that Isarya has become a priest and roamed from place to place and that Gaju was pregnant. Ziprya, Manu and Ravji had heard of it too. They were critical of his priesthood and decided not to obey their father. 'Why should we do what he says? We are not his slaves. Let us go to our house and look after our mother and sisters. We shall work as day labourers for the whole day. Ravlya told me that labour is required on Somya, the potter's, farm. By the way, have you seen Gaju? She is pregnant. I worked for her for so many years but she never gave me anything,' Ziprya said to them.

'I must tell you that she goes to Gunti's house and has been spending nights there for quite some days. She must have got pregnant there,' added Ravji.

'Her father is the chief of the village. What will he do when the people call the panchayat? Ravji, unleash the bullocks and send them to the forest. I will go home with Manu and ask aai to prepare the porridge. Then we will proceed for work,' Ziprya suggested.

As per plan, Ziprya and Manu went home. Ravji went to the

forest with the bullocks. In the evening he left the bullocks in Isarya's cowshed and went to Tukyā. Ziprya went to Isari and told her about their plan. 'Give us something to eat. Manu and I will go to other farms as workers. Uncle Ravlya told us that labour is wanted over there.' He was forthright in asserting his will.

'Are you in your senses? What will your own uncle say? Do you wish that Isarya and I should fight with each other? He came to our help in the nick of time. He brought you up. Without him, we would have perished long back. Don't you forget that!' Isari did not favour this idea of her children leaving their own uncle and working with somebody else.

'What you say is right. But I have given my best till date and received nothing in return. Uncle does not have any control over his own daughter. She always looks down upon me. As if that is not enough, she is now pregnant.' Ziprya asserted himself.

'Is that true? I can understand.' Isari could see the point in Ziprya's argument. She said, 'You are not wrong, my son. He hasn't given us full year's returns. He repaid what we owed to Balu, the grocer. He provided us with grains sometimes. That is true. But that is not enough, at least not the worth of your hard work for him. I will ask him. You are right. Now have this porridge and go to work.'

Aatya sat at the door, making stacks. As soon as the children left, Isari came out and sat by his side. Aatya had heard every word of their conversation. 'You will have no chance to ask Isarya. He is enjoying his priesthood now. He has no time to answer your questions,' he said to her and went to the farm to look after the cattle and the goat.

'Ziprya was telling me that he had not even touched Gaju but she is pregnant. He fears that they might hold him responsible for it. He doesn't want to go to Isarya's house now. What shall we do?' Isari was anxious over this issue.

'They will go begging from door to door. What else? There is nothing to eat in the house and who would marry these wandering brats, your sons! They don't want to work. Why don't you go with them? Let me go to the farm. You must leave before I return. Otherwise I will kick you out,' Aatya barked at her.

'Why do you blame me? I did not ask them to go and work elsewhere. And why should I go with them? You should go to your second wife. I will not leave this house,' she warned him.

Aatya lost his temper, rolled back and kicked her in fury. Isari was breast-feeding little Asha and was caught unawares and went rolling down as he kicked. Asha started howling. Gnashing her teeth, Isari got to her feet and caught Aatya by his collar and slapped him in the face twice or thrice. He too retaliated with vengeance. Beating her with a stick, he went out towards the river with the stack on his back.

Isari was swinging Asha in a makeshift cloth swing when Ziprya and Manu returned from work. Showing her the bundles of rice the potter had given them—no less than five kilograms—Ziprya said, ‘Aai, we are too hungry. Cook bhagar. It has been a long time since we had the porridge you gave us in the morning.’ Isari tried to hide the lump in her throat but she could not control herself. ‘You have brought the rice home, the sparkling grains! Look at my back, the red scars all over that your father has given me,’ she said as she wiped her tears. She then instructed Sunati to boil water and asked Manu to look after Asha. She made some chilli powder and cooked bhagar for all. ‘We will leave nothing for your father,’ she warned them.

‘Don’t you worry, aai. We have grown up now and we will teach him a lesson one day. He shall pay for what he has done to you. What has he done for us? Nothing! We grew up on somebody else’s mercy,’ Ziprya assured her.

In the morning, Ziprya and Manu had their breakfast—the leftovers—and went to work with packed roti for lunch. Isari swept the house and busied herself with housework. Just then Jura’s daughter came to her house carrying a big container on her head. ‘I have brought fish for you. Aaba came last night and stayed with us. He has gone to the river now and has asked me to bring roti from you,’ she said.

Isari emptied the container of fish and sent her back. ‘Tell your mother that Aaba beat me last night and my hands are swollen. I cannot make roti. Tell your mother to make roti for him,’ she knocked her off.

In the evening she cooked fish and waited for her sons to return home. The unexpected arrival of Isarya created a ripple. ‘Where are your sons?’ There was irritation in his voice when he spoke. ‘Why have they turned back on me? Have they found better masters? They came to me only in times of need. Did you also not feel the need to



send them to me? Your sons have grown up now and you don't need your brother any longer, that is the truth. Where is Aatya?' he fretted and questioned her.

'The devil must have gone back to his second wife. He beat me for the sake of my children. What can I do? I cannot force them to work for you. What about your own daughter? Ziprya told me she is pregnant. You are the chief of the village and you don't know what she is doing. I am told that she goes to Gunti's house and spends the night over there. Ziprya has warned me that he would never marry her,' answered Isari.

Isarya returned home and beat his wife and daughter in a fit of anger. Gaju ran back in fear to Gunti's house. He then went to Bhavram and asked him to call the panchayat. He sat in the charpoy silently. Meeru came to him with roti and requested him to have his meal but he refused to touch it.

As day dawned, Bhavram's voice penetrated the silence, 'Listen, you all. Everyone must attend the meeting. The chief has called the meeting.'

Isari was taken aback as she heard Bhavram's voice. She rightly guessed that the village panchayat was to be called. 'Wake up, my sons. Uncle Bhavram is yelling. It means the panchayat is meeting today. Don't leave the house today. Isarya must have given the call for the meeting,' she alerted her sons.

'Aai, your brother has invited his death or may be you will lose your son, I can't help. I am at my wit's end,' Ziprya responded.

'What's wrong with you? Why do you blame my brother? You shall not harm my brother, I warn you. Hell with that slut! Let her marry whomsoever she wants. She is the culprit. Do not take it out on my brother. If you harm him, I will kill myself. Moreover, you will rot in jail and she will enjoy herself. Why do you take her so seriously? There are other girls of the Bhils to marry,' Isari warned them in advance.

People gathered and soon there was a crowd. Isarya had already found a place for himself under the tree. Aatya came with some members of Bhilati. Ziprya and Manu arrived with sticks. Sunati was horrified by the sight of impending violence and rushed hurriedly to Isari. 'Aai, I don't think they will spare our uncle today. Let us go. We must save his life,' she requested her mother.

‘Women are not allowed to participate in the proceedings of the panchayat, you know that,’ Isari tried to silence her.

The residents of Bhilati had come well-equipped with sticks. Ravlya came forward to speak first. ‘What’s the matter? Tell us the truth. We are ready to fight,’ he roared at Isarya who stood up instantly with his eyes towards the ground.

‘None of your fault, my brother! No one has committed a crime. If at all anyone is wrong, it is me. My daughter has brought disgrace to my family. I feel ashamed of what she has done. I am at your mercy now but, go and ask my daughter first to name the person who slept with her. Justice will be done after she speaks out,’ Isarya’s tone was subdued when he spoke.

Bhavram and Ravlya turned to Isarya’s house. Stamping the ground with the sticks they quickened their pace and arrived at Isarya’s house. Meeru and Gaju had locked themselves inside the house. Ravlya knocked at the door with the stick. They were trembling with fear and did not dare to open the door.

‘Open the door, I say. Tell us the name of the rascal. Your father has sent us,’ he shouted.

‘Never! We will not open the door. You want to beat us. Go and tell the jury that my daughter insists that it is Ziprya’s child,’ Meeru spoke from inside.

The two returned and Ravlya turned to Ziprya, ‘It is your child,’ she says. After having reported what she had said, Ravlya turned to the crowd and said, ‘Let’s go. It is their personal matter.’

‘Why did you wash your dirty linen in public?’ he criticised Isarya before he left.

On hearing this, Ziprya and Manu lost their temper and flashing their sticks, rushed to Isarya. Tukya and Ravji hastened to protect Isarya. In this scuffle Manu’s stick hit Tukya’s head and he collapsed on the ground. People gathered around Tukya and taking advantage of the situation, Ziprya cornered Isarya and hit him hard on the back. As Isarya screamed, people rushed to him.

‘No more violence please!’ Ravlya intervened. ‘You should discuss the matter instead of hitting him like this. Tukya is wounded already. Isarya is our chief. If he goes to the police station to lodge a complaint, you will go to jail. Don’t blame your uncle then,’ Ravlya was trying for a peaceful solution.

‘Why should I spare him when I am not at all at fault? How dare she involve me in this dirty act? I have not even touched her once, I swear in the name of this soil. He cannot control his daughter. Let him go and ask her the truth. Besides, I will also have my wages for the last twenty five years I worked for him. If he fails, I will kill him today,’ Ziprya was not ready to give in so easily and insisted on justice.

Isarya and Ravlya went back to Gaju to verify the truth in this matter. Here, pretending to go to toilet, Ziprya went to the backyard and took out the sword hidden inside a bamboo. Hiding it under his clothing, he went to Isarya’s house. Isarya and Ravlya were busy getting the truth out of Gaju. Ziprya hid behind the door. As soon as Isarya and Meeru came near the door they saw Ziprya. Instantly, Meeru pulled Isarya inside and bolted the door. Ziprya tried to attack but the sword hit the door instead, making a crack. Ravlya screamed from inside, ‘You have come with the intention of starting a fight. If chance had not favoured us, you would have killed us.’ He instructed Isarya to handle the situation as he wished, along with a warning not to leave his house. He promised to take care of the panchayat.

‘Brother Ravlya, I don’t want my daughter to marry that thief. He is already married and is the father of four. I am ready to compensate for the panchayat and Ziprya’s loss,’ Isarya spoke from the room he had locked himself in. Then he made an appeal to Ziprya, ‘Gaju says that Gunti’s second father-in-law’s son was responsible for her pregnancy. Take what you want, Ziprya, and spare my life. Don’t waste your life for a girl like her. On the contrary, you should marry someone of your own choice and settle down. You can take that goat from my fold for the jury along with four champas of rice. I will give a hundred rupees for wine too. Do you agree now?’ Isarya was apologetic and begged humbly for his life.

‘Yes uncle! I agree. I will also take that bullock along with two of my own and a cow. Do you agree, uncle?’ Ziprya did not hesitate to make his demand.

‘I have no objection. You will have everything you want,’ with these words, Isarya instructed Ravlya to take two big containers from his house to the panchayat. He looked for two more and then the two went back to the panchayat. Everything was explained to the jury. It was time for dinner now. However, Ravlya suggested that Ziprya and Gaju, who were engaged to each other, should be officially

separated.

Isarya, Ravlya and Ziprya arrived at Isarya's house. Gaju was asked to wear a new sari. Ziprya clad himself in a new dhoti given by Isarya. He wore it the way he liked, stretched out to the ankles. The loose ends of the sari and the dhoti were tied into a knot which Gaju untied. Ziprya came forward to cut the pallu of her sari. The two wiped out each other's kumkum. He also broke the string of beads round her neck and her bangles, kicked the door and walked off with his cattle without looking back.

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## Outcaste

The search for job brought Ziprya, Manu and Ravji to the village of Bundhadi, a place where Ambu lived. They got the job of felling trees. They earned one anna for a big tree and half anna for a small one. After working for a month, Ziprya earned twenty five rupees, Manu fifteen and Ravji twenty rupees. Out of their total earnings, Ziprya and Manu sent theirs back home. Ravji deposited his earnings with Ziprya. There was no flour-mill in the village in those times. Ziprya bought six champas of broken rice from the shop and added salt and chilli as replacement for vegetable. Their morning meal consisted of bhagar and chilli powder and they had porridge for the evening. Ambu sent roti and vegetable, occasionally. Surya and Devji used to pack rice and dal and contributed to work in the open-air kitchen and slept there most of the times.

Ambu was pregnant for the second time. Hers was a large joint family; three pairs of in-laws and their children made a total of forty members. Women cooked in turns. Ambu and one of the mothers-in-law were in charge of the kitchen in the evening and morning kitchen duties were assigned to another mother-in-law and a housemaid. For Ambu, the day dawned with grinding not less than a basketful of grains to have enough stock of flour for rotis in the evening. In the absence of enough quantity of flour, she had to cook four champas of rice in addition to rotis. During festivals, four champas of rice and two basketful of rotis! As soon as she returned from the farm she turned to the oven to make rotis. Her mother-in-law took the responsibility of only preparing vegetable. After dinner Ambu would be off to bed, hardly for an hour or two, and then back to grinding grains again! This was the routine with Ambu. At the end of the hard day's toil, Ambu used to be completely drained.

Ziprya's heart ached at the thought of Ambu's miserable condition. 'Look at our sister. She slogs and slogs all through the day

and looks at us silently. She is eight months pregnant now. Yet her mothers-in-law have no pity. Oh, my darling little sister! How will she sustain herself? Manu, let us help her. You will fetch water and I will grind the grains at dawn. She will have some relief.’ Ziprya’s concern for his sister was visible when he said this.

Ziprya, Manu and Ravji rested for a while when they returned home in the evening. Ziprya got up and lit the oven to make hot water. They warmed their hands with hot water. Ambu had just returned from the farm.

‘Have you finished cooking?’ she asked them when she saw them at the oven. ‘You are always in a hurry. Have some beans. I know you make do with chilli powder only everyday. What is that? Porridge?’ she asked as she looked at the pitcher on the oven.

‘Not really. It’s only hot water to warm our hands,’ pointing out to the blisters on their hands, he replied.

‘Are you mad? That will not do. You must use the bark of palash to warm your hands. You will get the results faster.’

Ambu felt tired and sat down. Anxiety was written on her face. Various patterns of tattoos—trees, flowers, dots—marked on her forehead, cheeks and hands stood out against the pallor of her face. With sunken cheeks, dreary eyes and a face gone pale, she looked frighteningly dismal, as desolate as a hill made bald due to fire.

Manu and Ravji fetched water and filled the big earthen pot to the brim and also the smaller ones. Ambu got back to cooking. She experienced a heaviness, which showed in in her sluggish movements, but she could not escape the cooking.

Ziprya cooked for the three of them. They had only *bhagar* and vegetable for dinner. Ambu served them roti and vegetable she had prepared. ‘I could make rotis so early because my brothers took the responsibility of fetching water,’ she said to him.

She spread a rough blanket in the verandah and sat down to distribute rotis. Everyone came to take their share of rotis and finally she joined her brothers for dinner. After dinner she confided in her brothers an interesting piece of news. ‘Ravji, they are looking for a match for my mother-in-law’s brother’s daughter. Their condition is that he must permanently stay with them. They have a fertile piece of land. Think of it, Ravji, and say ‘yes’. Besides, I will have somebody, my own brother, by my side in times of difficulty,’ she

added.

‘Why not? Ravji will stay here. We are almost done with the job of felling trees, not more than a week’s work. It will be followed by chopping and sawing and we don’t know how to do it. So, we will go back home,’ Ziprya gave his consent to the proposal.

Ambu slept, but only for a while. She got up and busied herself with grinding grains. The rumbling sound of the grinding stone woke Ziprya who instantly extended a hand of help to his sister. He also asked Ravji to get up and cook bhagar for the three of them. It was dark and Ambu could not recognise Ziprya whose hands moved faster than hers. She was scared but when she came to know that it was Ziprya she was relieved. ‘I can’t keep pace with you, my brother,’ she said.

‘You just keep dropping grains in the mouth of the mill, I will manage the rest of it. You will get some rest,’ he responded.

Ziprya managed to make the flour faster. The day was about to break. ‘Let me go now. Others must have already left for work. In the early hours of the morning your efficiency is at its highest. When the sun comes out you automatically slow down. Sticky hands make things difficult.’

They brushed their teeth with a neem stem and set out with the food parcel. On the way they stopped to bathe in the river, had their breakfast and reported at the work place for the job of felling trees. But Bapu Mehta came late. He assigned some forty trees to them. Ziprya and Ravji worked faster but Manu lingered behind and sat down rubbing his hands. He had big blisters on the palm. After a short lunch-break they again resumed their work. ‘You must finish it today before it gets dark. From tomorrow, the woodcutters will chop them to make logs. I am expecting the contractor from Mumbai within a week. You will be paid here in the evening,’ Bapu ordered them.

By sunset Ziprya and Ravji had finished their share of work but Manu had yet to finish his. Ziprya wanted to return home before it got dark.

‘They will come in the morning and scrape the logs. It is not our job. They have piled them up in the shed. They use a special scythe for scrubbing the trunk. They do it so well! How smooth and bright the logs look! Let us go back and come early in the morning to fell

the remaining trees. Manu, don't you worry. We will help you out. Bring our lunch. Our accounts will be settled tomorrow. We will collect our wages and go back to our village. I am missing my mother. I wonder how she must have managed to run the house. There was hardly anything to eat. Our father is of no use. He always runs to Bhilati. Our sister Ambu will deliver the baby in a few days. Who will cook for the family then? Her husband and Devji prefer to stay on the farm. Poor Ambu! Hurry up. She must be making rotis at home. Let us go and find out,' Ziprya reflected on the situation.

When they reached the house, Ambu had just finished cooking. Wiping the beads of perspiration, she came out and greeted them. Manu and Ravji sat warming their hands.

'Why are you so late today?' she asked. 'Look at his hands. Blisters all over! Why did you work so hard?' she was moved by the plight of her brothers, especially of Manu.

'Sister, Manu could not finish his work today. We will do it tomorrow and go back to our village. Aai also needs help. You know there is no work in the village. I don't know how she must have managed. She can only cut grass and send it to the market. Uncle lent his cart till now. However, our relations are strained now. I am doubtful whether he would continue with his support,' Ziprya briefed her.

'What's wrong?' Why are the relations strained?' she was unable to guess.

'His daughter is pregnant and it is not my child. The panchayat was called. Uncle wanted me to marry her. How can I marry her when I know that she detests me? Tell me. Had uncle Ravlya not intervened, I would have killed our uncle. I defied him and snatched his bulls and a cow and came back. That is how we could come here for work,' Ziprya informed Ambu.

'You have been here for so many days and you never told me about it,' Ambu grumbled.

The morning was marked by the same routine except for the fact that Manu did not wake up that day. Ravji and Ziprya went away without disturbing Manu. They had prepared their breakfast and carried it with them. Ambu was busy with housework when Manu got up. Looking at his hand he started crying. Ambu rushed to him. She took the needle and tried to prick but the blisters had hardened



with the swelling. She took a blade and cut them open. It helped drain out the watery discharge and impure blood. Manu was considerably relieved and a smile brightened his face. Ziprya and Ravji were also relieved to see Manu smiling when they returned. They had put together their earnings. Now, Ziprya proceeded to buy some red jwar. He requested Ravji to stay with Ambu and gave him his earnings. However, Ravji returned the money to him telling him to pass it on to their mother for daily expenses. He kept only five rupees for himself.

That evening Ambu's father-in-law came home from the farm. He said, 'Are your brothers leaving tomorrow? Give me the basket. I will pack some rice and tuar dal for your mother. Let them have fresh rice and dal since the harvest is just over.'

The next morning Ziprya and Manu got ready to leave for their own village. The baggage was too heavy for them to carry. So Ambu asked Ravji to go with them and return the next day. It was time to see them off. The three of them walked off casting a longing, lingering look behind. Ambu's eyes too were moist with tears. She followed them a little distance and turned back sobbing and wiping away her tears.

Halting on their way occasionally, they reached home by evening. Asha ran to them as she saw them entering the house. Taking off the load, they sat down and relaxed, reporting to Isari, their mother, every little bit about Ambu. Isari too had a lot to share with them, no less interesting.

'Ever since you left, Gaju comes home and requests me to send you to her house,' she said to Ziprya, 'she has been helping me with the mill since you went away. Isarya himself asked her to do so until you returned. Only a week ago she delivered the baby. It is a boy. "If my daughter had slept with another man she would have never come to your house so often," Isarya argues with me. "That rascal impregnates my daughter and runs away. Your favourite son! You must be looking for another girl for him," he complains,' reported Isari.

'Isarya brought home my uncle's son one day. He brought him along with a girl he had found for him. He stopped talking to her after a week. This is my own brother who shelters distant relatives and kicks out his kin. Why did he not find a girl for Ravji?' Isari

fretted.

‘Why do you bother aai? Let’s see how long can he get along with the stranger. I am sure he will not stay on for a long time. Forget it. Now tell me how many carts of grass did you sell?’ Ziprya asked her.

‘But for this wounded hand, I would have sold it long back. Your father hit my hand so hard that I could not do anything,’ she complained. ‘Sunati has been nursing it, ever since, with the bark of palash. The swelling has subsided only because of the efforts she took. However, it still pains,’ she added.

After breakfast, Ravji went back to Ambu’s village. Ziprya went out to arrange for the carts. He had to carry the grass to the market for sale. He could fix two and was in need of one more. He went to Bhilati where Aatya, Ravlya, Phulya and Bitya were chatting. On seeing Ziprya, Aatya got up and went to Jura. Ravlya offered his cart to him.

‘You must have made a lot of money. Why do you need to sell the grass?’ he asked Ziprya.

‘Not much! We could keep our body and soul together. That’s all,’ Ziprya answered. ‘I did save a few rupees, say twenty five or so. I must buy a sari and blouse for my mother. She had a tough time having enough to cover her body. What a sari! Nothing but patch work! And our shameless father is unmoved. There are also two more girls in the house to take care of,’ Ziprya was forthright in his criticism of his father.

Sunati was amusing little Asha when Ziprya came home. Gaju also sat with her son by her side. The moment Ziprya stepped in, she took to heels.

‘Why did that slut come here?’ Ziprya asked Sunati, irritated with Gaju’s presence.

‘Nothing special! She was only asking when you—her son’s father—and uncle arrived.’

‘Damn that impudent bitch! Calls me her son’s father! I know who the father is. It is her sister’s brother-in-law and no one else. Had I heard her say that I would have slapped her in the face,’ Ziprya could not control his anger.

It was time to load the carts. Dagdu and Raghu from the colony of the Mavchis and Aanya from the Bhilatis arrived with their bullock-carts. Ziprya went up the huge pile of grass and started throwing the

sheaves into the cart. When all the carts were loaded with grass, they came to Ziprya's house to spend the night. Next day, early in the morning, they packed their lunch and rode to Pimpalner. Two of the carts fetched thirty rupees each because the grass was green. But the third one received the offer of just fifteen rupees since the grass was reddish brown. Ziprya thought for a moment, paid the rent of five rupees each for the first two carts and sent them back. He told Dagdu to wait till morning. He hoped to sell it at a higher rate at the weekly bazaar.

The next day was the weekly bazaar day. A cavalcade of carts dotted the place. Ziprya sold his grass for twenty five rupees. Then they rode to Namdeo's house. He asked for a glass of water. Namdeo, the carpenter, asked him to go inside and ask his aunt for water. She was busy with her daily housework.

'Aunty, a glass of water, please! Uncle has sent me to you,' Ziprya called.

'Damn your uncle! It doesn't cost anything for your uncle to give orders. Today is the bazaar day and people will drop in for water. He thinks I have no work. I wish he knew what it means to be a housewife,' she blasted at her husband. She came out with a bucket full of water, dumped it on the ground and shut the door on him.

Ziprya went to a corner with the bucket, had his breakfast and made for the bazaar. He was on his shopping spree today. He purchased eight champas of nagli at the rate of twelve aanas, eight champas of sava at eight aanas each and also salt and chilli. To top his shopping list he bought a sari and a blouse for his dear mother for ten and a half rupees and a dhoti for seven rupees.

He returned home with Dagdu. Isari had caught plenty of crabs and prepared the wine too. The two had a feast. Isari was delighted to see her gift. Ziprya shared his plan with his mother. He wanted to cultivate land this year. He asked her to pull on for some more time with the minimum she had lived by till now. He thought of raising some money by selling a goat or two until it rained. He worked hard with his cattle.

The rains came and Ziprya got busy with mending his plough. One day, as he was getting it ready, Aatya came with green leaves collected from the forest for the lambs. He looked at Ziprya in anger and commented, 'As if it was not enough to stay with in-laws, he now

wants to support his mother with farming. She will not have to work. And in return she will get them girls. I know it.' Ziprya lost his temper and rushed at him with the axe. If Sunati had not stopped him he would have hit him hard. A narrow escape for Aatya!

Isari worshipped the bullocks. A perfect ritual! Kumkum and aarti and finally a special offering of nagali for the bullocks! They too looked happy. Ziprya got the plough in order. The light drizzle continued. After feeding the bullocks with sufficient grass, he went to the farm. Isari sowed maize, not less than one or two kilograms, in the field. Ziprya sent her home to bring the seed of bhagar. He suggested that along with maize, bhagar would also grow across the field. He wanted to try his luck.

Ziprya went around the village asking for groundnut seeds, but no one came forward to help him. He thought of another plan. 'Aai, no one is ready to give us groundnut seeds. Why don't you tell Aaba to sell a goat and buy seed?' Ziprya advised his mother.

When Isari asked Aatya, he gave a characteristic reply, 'Mother and son want to till the land now! Sell your own goats if you have any. Why do you come to me? Mind you, I am not going sell mine.'

However, Ziprya did not give up. He went to uncle Ravlya the next day. He requested him to borrow seeds from some grocer. 'Let's go to the market to buy seed. Uncle, many grocers know you well. No one knows me. Aaba has refused to part with his goat. Only you can help me,' he coaxed Ravlya.

The two went to Pimpalner. In the market, to their surprise, they met Balu the grocer—Aatya's arch enemy! Ravlya greeted him and asked him for eight champas of groundnut seeds.

'Did anyone in your family ever till the land? Not your cup of tea, Ravlya! You people can only butcher animals. That has been your profession,' Balu spoke sarcastically.

'Not me, *seth*. Ziprya, Aatya's son, wants it. He wants to cultivate land this year.'

'How would he know? His father never did it. He went begging all his life but never cared to learn the art of farming. If he had, he and his family would have lived happily. Look Ravlya, since you are asking me I will give the seeds. But if he fails to return them, I will hold you responsible for it. You will stand as surety for him. I will not ask them.'

Balu came home with Ravlya and Ziprya. Ziprya had no alternative but to put up with this affront and keep mum. When Balu went in, his wife whispered something into his ears. He came out and asked Ravlya to chop the wood first. Ziprya and Ravlya worked at it by turns until afternoon. They got the seeds only after completing the job.

Ravlya and Isarya came back from Pimpalner by evening, carrying the heavy load of groundnuts on their heads, taking turns. As soon as he entered the house he threw the bundle on the ground and gulped a glass of water and lay down. Isari served him roti and he went to bed. Aatya was awake. He sat by the fire but did not speak to Ziprya. Sunati brought him roti and he dropped off to sleep. Within minutes, he was snoring. Isari, Manu, Sunati and Janya snapped the groundnuts late at night.

In the morning, Isari went to Tukya's house and brought some seeds of white gram. Everyone was busy with something or the other when Isarya came to his sister's house. He looked piteous. Aatya was on his way to the forest. He stopped him and called Isari. He was short of hands.

'Jeevalya has run away. I found a girl for him. Yet he left. What do I do without hands? Who will till the land though I have two ploughs? Send Manu this year to work with me,' he asked for a favour.

'Isarya, we need to earn our daily bread. We tried to cultivate our land but the yield was not adequate. My sons go to work on daily wages. I can go for weeding. When there is no work for my sons they will also go weeding.'

'How much do you need? I will provide foodgrains for all but help me now. Please send Manu with me. My daughter is an impostor, I know. But we are siblings, still. Why should we break with each other because of her? Haven't I always looked after your children?' he appealed to her.

Isarya went away with Manu. In the afternoon, when Isarya and Manu went to the farm, Mangu came to see Ziprya and Isari. 'Ziprya, your son wants to talk to you. I will go and request him to come home. My son is growing up. It will be better if he stays with both of his parents. Both of us will work hard for our son. Gaju also keeps on saying. Don't say 'no'. We are waiting for you Ziprya. We

will work together.'

'Never! Girls from rich families will never have an alliance with the poor like me. Don't I know that?'

Mangu laughed and went away.

In the afternoon Ziprya relaxed on the embankment in the field while his cattle grazed. He had finished sowing the groundnuts and black gram. Just then Manu came with his herd.

'Look after my bullock tomorrow morning. There is nothing to eat in the house except vegetables. I will go to the grocer and bring some grains,' Ziprya said to Manu.

'Why don't you ask our mother to request our uncle to give some grains? I will also tell him when I get back home. Do send her tomorrow,' Manu suggested.

'No! Don't do anything of the kind. I will bring some from the grocer.'

In the evening Ziprya came home. He sat in the open veranda. Aatya sat close by his side but with his back towards him. Sunati came with vegetables and roasted mahua flowers. Both ate without a word with each other. They didn't even look at each other. Manu came with roti for his mother. 'Distribute this among all,' he said to her.

'No. You must eat it. You have worked so hard for the whole day. My poor son! We will make do with vegetable only,' she replied.

In those times, there were a large number of mahua trees not only in the forest but in the village too. The chief of the tribe ruled over the village then. All followed the rules unhesitatingly. When the trees flowered people guarded the trees collectively. They never even picked up the flowers fallen on the ground. They allowed them to dry there. When the budding season was over and the trees were flowerless, the village guard would go around the village with his drum and give a call to gather flowers. Each one then busied oneself with flower picking. Half of the families earned their living by farming. The other half worked as day labourers. Keeping the yield of only one tree for private use, each farmer contributed the rest to the village. Yes, there was no private ownership of trees or flowers. After putting the flowers together they were equally distributed among all families again. Even a widow enjoyed the right to an equivalent share of this floral wealth. The private granaries thus overflowed

with mahua flowers. In the absence of foodgrains, these flowers used to be their daily diet. They baked them or ground them to make flour. Of course, everyone used to reserve a certain quota of mahua flowers for making wine. The villagers were advised not to ramble in the forest at night as a measure against snake or scorpion bite. The mahua trees were loaded with *tolambis* in course of time. The same rule of collective preservation and distribution applied to the fruit of the trees. All the *tolambis*, after drying, were put together, taken to the market to extract oil and the same was redistributed equally among all.

However, after Independence everything changed. With the entry of the forest department, the forest itself was threatened. Under the name of prohibition of liquor, an edict was sent out: 'Preserve the *tolambis* but cut the mahua trees'. The trees disappeared in no time; it was a threat in disguise to the village. The rules and laws of the forest department were strict and the needs of the people remained unfulfilled. Consequently, people got to felling mahua trees to fulfill their needs especially on occasions as death, weddings or religious ceremonies. There were only seven or eight mahua trees left in the forest. The village looks desolate. Gone are the mahua flowers and *tolambi* oil! Pangs of hunger force the poor folk to wander in search of jobs with no guarantee of a square meal a day.

Bhavram came to announce to the colony that labour was required on Gaba Patil's farm and that each family should send one person. 'Pack your lunch and get going early in the morning,' he ordered.

Ziprya came to Isari and said, 'Aai, I am going to the grocer. Manu will graze the bullocks. You tell our father to go and work on Gaba Patil's farm.'

In the morning Aatya said to Sunati, 'Is the porridge ready? I should be going. But, how can I root out the sugarcane without a spade? I have only a scythe.'

'Don't bother, Aaba. You don't have to dig. Look at those going with their spades. Let them dig up and you will chop it with your scythe. Here is your mahua porridge. Mother has cooked it for you. Take this scythe.'

People came from every house and set out for Patil's farm. The tribals from twenty eight colonies in Pankheda worked in turns on Shahu Patil's farm. They were the slaves of the government officers,

moneylenders and high caste landlords at the same time, totally ignorant about the abolition of the custom of bonded labour after Independence.

Bhavram escorted all to Patil's farm. He was ready with quite a few spades and was waiting for them. 'You must finish these two rows today, one before lunch and the other after lunch,' said Patil, twisting his moustache in pride. 'Give these spades to the men, the women will pick and chop the roots. Let some men pile up the roots and set fire to it. See to it that you clean the field of roots. I am going for lunch,' he instructed Bhavram.

In the afternoon everybody went to the river and sat down for lunch. Most of them had got bhagar or roti for lunch. Aatya had brought only mahua flowers and so shied away in shame. He sat at a distance behind a stone and had his humble meal.

Patil returned to the farm and insisted on finishing the two rows at any cost. By the time they finished the job for the day, it was dark. Women had a tough time climbing up and down the slopes. Their feet slipped every now and then. There was a hill close to the village. While climbing down, Aatya's slippers came off and he came rolling down the hill. He had worn only a loin cloth. His bottoms were scratched as he rolled and came home limping. He threw the scythe in the verandah from a distance and came in. It bounced and hit Sunati's head. She screamed in pain. Isari came out and asked her the reason for her crying. She could not put up with the truth. 'Look at him. Gone berserk! That's why he throws the scythe at his daughter. An imposter! As if he has brought a purse full of money! Has he ever brought a coin home? I have never seen one,' she blasted at him.

'Hell with your money, Isari! Had you not sent me to work, this would never have happened to me. See the bottoms; scratched all over! Do you think I am so ruthless as to hit my own daughter?' he shouted.

Isari got up early next morning, lit the oven and started winnowing the sava Ziprya had brought. It was mixed with a lot of dust so she put it aside and sat quietly by the fire, feeling utterly helpless and desperate! When the day broke, Ziprya left for work and she got back to snapping sava and ground it to make flour. Sunati swept the fold and went to pick vegetables. She returned home with a basketful of vegetables. Isari cooked it and made rotis. Giving each



one half a roti and some vegetable she took one full roti and vegetable to Ziprya who was working on the farm. Sunati went out in search of a job, as a wage-earner. Aatya stayed at home to take care of Asha. Isari came back and weeded the yard. It took four to five days to weed the entire yard.

Housework consumed most of her time. She had run out of grains. There was no work in the village. 'Ziprya, I have cooked only vegetable today. There is not a single grain in the house. Your father doesn't go out and search for a job. If I go to Isarya he might say, "You come to me when there is no one else to turn to. You should have thought about everything before you called out your sons." What do we do?'

'Don't go to uncle, aai. We will manage with mahua. There are many who can't afford a roti,' Ziprya consoled his mother.

This was the routine with Isari—weeding the yard, picking vegetables, cooking and making do with what was available with the occasional luck of having food grains. Sunati extended a hand of help whenever she could earn wages.

Ziprya went to Balu again that morning. 'Seth, I want eight champas of grains again. Once the harvest is done, I will repay everything. Believe me, this is the last time I am requesting you. I will not pester you again. Don't disappoint me,' he begged.

'It is not even a week since you borrowed from me and you are here again. Are you not ashamed of it? Go and clear that yard of cowdung first, then I will give you some grains. You will rob us of the entire stock. Leave something for us too,' Balu grumbled.

Ziprya cleared the entire area of the dung; it looked as if it was not removed for a week or so. He went to the river, washed his hands and feet and came back. Balu gave Ziprya eight champas of worm-eaten red jwar and made an entry of thirty-two champas against his name in the book.

When Ziprya returned home Isari was engaged with weeding the yard. She served him porridge and resumed her work. Just then Manu arrived with a bundle of wild rice given by Isarya.

'Why don't you ask for other grains? Rice doesn't suffice even if you consume a big quantity, whereas even half a roti will help you pull on for a day,' she said to him.

‘Uncle never asked me. I just picked up the bundle he gave me. That’s all,’ Manu answered.

The next day Ziprya went to the farm with the plough. Isari and Sunati joined him and helped him with the weeding. The beds of nagli were ready for plucking now. ‘Ask Aaba too to come tomorrow. He will pluck the saplings and we will replant them. Before the rains come the saplings will be firmly rooted. We don’t have to worry then. We can look for jobs elsewhere in the meantime,’ Ziprya proposed.

A day after, Aatya, Isari, Ziprya and Sunati executed the plan. Ziprya loosened the soil gently. Aatya plucked the saplings and made small sheaves. Sunati put them in a basket and Isari and Ziprya replanted them. It took three days for them to cover the entire field.

As the jwar and groundnuts grew, weeds also grew with them. The provisions were nearly exhausted. Ziprya’s speculations of the rising curve of difficulties would not let him rest even for a minute. If they failed to weed the farm in time, it would destroy the crop, he thought. Consequently, they would not be able to repay the loan. The moneylender would shut the doors permanently in case of failure of repayment. There was still one month for the maize to be ready. If he went as a wage earner they would detain him until it got dark. Without work they would starve. No one in the neighbourhood lent grains. Ziprya was almost at his wit’s end. He knitted his eyebrows and finally arrived at some solution: ‘You weed our farm regularly. Sunati will help you,’ he said to Isari, ‘I will go with uncle Ravlya as a labourer and earn some wages. They go to distant places such as Dapur, Jebapur, Pimpalner and Unkhali. Besides, Patlikheda and Kalikhet are also at least five to six kilometers away from here. Sunati, being a woman, cannot undertake such long-distance jobs. I am a man and will manage somehow. It’s a matter of a fortnight or so,’ he explained to his mother.

Ziprya earned one kilogram of grains daily and Isari and Sunati looked after their farm. Ziprya’s earnings provided them with one meal a day. Isari was uncomfortable with this state of affairs. She thought of something but did not share it with anybody except Sunati. Their own farm lay barren. Only grass grew in the black soil. She abandoned the weeding and went to that farm. She plucked the corns of grass and found that the seed had gone yellow.

‘The sun has set. Pluck the vegetable. We can make only one roti

with the flour. Let us add that to the vegetable and cook. I am feeling giddy after the continuous weeding. Moreover, the pangs of hunger are unbearable. How miserable! Those who have a full granary will prosper. Those who haven't, will lick dust. Why does god help those who need nothing? We are no better than beasts. They eat grass and we eat vegetables. Where is the difference? The flies also avoid our excreta,' Isari spoke in desperation.

*Kuduchi* were in blossoms. Isari separated the flowers and put the leaves in a pitcher for cooking. She boiled the vegetable and added salt and chilli powder to it. Then she made a paste of the little flour that was left and added it to the vegetable. They waited until it thickened. It was now ready to eat and after they had their meal, waited for Ziprya by the fire. He came late. He had brought with him some jwar and asked Isari to grind it and make rotis. 'The day is spent but the night is yet to pass,' he said to Isari. 'How long the night is! It looks as if it will never pass,' he added.

'I have cooked vegetable with flour today. Better if you make do with that. I will grind the grains and make roti tomorrow morning,' Isari suggested. However, she woke up at midnight. She collected the fire in a pan and kept it underneath the charpoy on which Asha slept. She feared that Asha might wake up, so she made her cosy with the warmth of the fire. Within a short time she had finished grinding the jwar Ziprya had brought. Sunati slept nearby. She woke her up and asked her to make roti. She took a bamboo and with a scythe, rubbed it off at one end. Then she made a vertical cut in it. The forked bamboo was used to hold a basket. She told Sunati to bring her food to the farm and went to work with the basket. She was on the farm now. She untied the piece of sari around her head and tied it to her waist. Her hands worked faster at the grass. She first collected the *zira* seeds in the basket and then packed it in her sari. Now she worked in frenzy, without the sari on. The entire field was draped in dew. As the day dawned, it slid down the grass blades. Isari had collected more than four kilograms of seeds by now. She was wet and came out, pressing her sari dry. She left the seeds to dry on the piece of sari spread out on the ground and took up weeding. Sunati arrived with the lunch wrapped in a piece of cloth. She looked at her mother. 'You are fully drenched. And by the way, where is your sari? Did you come without one? Come, let's have our lunch first. You had only

vegetable last night,' she said to Isari.

'I had been to that strip of land to collect zira seeds. That's why I am wet.'

'Only the jungle tribes eat the seed of grass, aai. We don't,' Sunati was surprised.

'Zira is not a variety of grass. It is wild grains. It fetches a big price in the market. The Shahu community always buys these grains. You have to thresh it skillfully so that it falls in the basket. Within no time the basket overflows with seeds. I am going to come here everyday,' Isari tried to enlighten Sunati.

After lunch, mother and daughter got back to cutting grass. It had grown very high. Jwar and groundnut needed water. The vegetables too had dried. So, they did not bring any in the evening. Isari was in a fix. There was nothing to cook. She sat in a corner breast-feeding Asha and suddenly thought of something. She put Asha aside and went out with a basket. She plucked the leaves of rough gourd. She instructed Sunati to pound the leaves. She was going to make *phangas* today. She mixed salt and chilli with it and added flour to it. She kneaded the mixture to make a thick dough. She cooked it in a vessel. It was time to take it out and put it in a plate. When it cooled, she cut it into pieces and distributed it among all.

Aatya hardly entered the house and usually slept in the verandah. Sunati served him food there itself. The relations between Aatya and Isari were further strained due to the quarrel with Isarya. The crop of *vari* and maize was ready. Aatya made himself comfortable in the yard. He had built a hut for himself and spent most of his time there, be it day or night. He also prepared a cloth swing for Asha.

Ziprya wanted to reap as early as possible since the crop was ready. The fear of thieves stealing the crop away at night always weighed heavily on his mind. In the yard he prepared a small area of ground for the reaping, threshing and winnowing. He told Isari that he would not go for work the next day and would finish with harvest at home. Isari and Sunati too joined him. Early in the morning the two started cutting the fully grown corns of *vari*. Ziprya, after a walk in the forest with Ravlya, brought the sheaves to the harvest ground. Manu, Sunati, Janya also went to the farm. Aatya felt worried about the flock of goat and asked Manu to send Isari home. He promised regular rounds to them. Isari returned home with Asha and Sunati. They

dropped off to sleep after a long wait for Ziprya. He came home at dawn. He had brought meat and asked Isari to cook it. She warned him not to wander at night and give an opportunity to his uncle to suspect his intentions.

'I don't care!' Ziprya retorted, 'I will go out any time. He has no right to question me. Now, cook the meat. I have already consumed the raw fat,' he requested Isari. He was too tired to stay awake. Isari cooked a small quantity of meat and kept the rest for the next day.

Manu came to take Ziprya's bullocks in the morning. However, Ziprya requested him not to make haste since he wanted to reap vari that day. Ziprya did not waste time and started early in the morning. Aatya also came to his help. In the afternoon he came in for lunch. Isari had prepared mutton and roti. She wanted to serve it to Aatya too but Ziprya did not allow her to do so.

'He does not deserve it. Even if you feel for him he will abuse you and may beat you as well,' Ziprya commented. On hearing this, Sunati ran to the yard, plucked some green chillies, crushed them and finally served it along with roti to Aatya. All others in the house feasted on mutton. They resumed their work after lunch. By evening a large quantity of vari was ready to carry home. Isari brought home maize in the evening. She prepared porridge for all. She sent some for Aatya with Sunati. Isari cooked the remaining meat and they all had mutton in the evening too. Ziprya sent Manu and Janya to the farm and he went to see Ravlya. He had covered himself with a rough blanket.

Ravlya used to go around the farms during the day and at night he would take his accomplices to these places. It was his habit. That day too he took Ziprya and all others to the farm of white grams which he had inspected in advance. He asked them to stay on the embankment and keep a watch. He also deposited some stones on all the borders. 'Come on! What are you waiting for? Cut as much of the crop as you can,' he ordered. 'Hurry up. Fill the sacks and put them on the embankment. Fill as much as you can carry.'

They returned home with their loot. Ziprya too carried a big bundle on his head and threw it on the ground as soon as he reached home. With the help of Isari he carried it inside. She had kept his food ready. He ate and dropped off to sleep. Isari snapped the pods. She had now almost one kilogram of grams ready for cooking. The

next morning Ziprya and Aatya brought home three big bundles of vari from their own farm. They had a good harvest this time. Two sacks of vari and three of maize! The broken grains were used for porridge regularly.

Ziprya soon got used to stealing. Everyday he worked during the day and at night explored the farms to bring home something or the other. This became a routine with him until the harvest. When the harvest was over and the farms lay bare, he switched to stealing cattle. He would roam in the forest, kill a goat, hide it beside a stream and after dark he would chop it and bring it home.

When jwar was reaped he could repay the grains he owed to Balu, the grocer. However, the crops of nagali and groundnuts were adversely affected by weeds. He could not reap them. Consequently, he could not return the seeds to Balu who had begun to send weekly messages to him.

Ziprya spent most of his time with Ravlya now. Ravlya gave lessons in wrestling to a few boys from Bhilati. Ziprya joined them in this enterprise to become a good wrestler within a few months. He participated in wrestling tournaments in nearby villages. Especially during the annual fairs, he found opportunities to play and win prizes. Many times, he brought utensils home. Looking at Ziprya's talent and skill in wrestling, Ravlya arranged for extra training from Narya, the wrestler from Chipi. Narya was a burglar too and Ravlya had been his accomplice in thieving for some time. He extended regular training to the boys on the river bank.

One day, Ziprya lay in bed at home due to pain in the knee. The swelling on the knee had confined him to home. Isari had a chance to take him to task that day. 'You never listen to me and go roaming the whole day. You have invited trouble for yourself. What will you do now?' she expressed her displeasure at his ventures. 'That swindler, the grocer, is coming tomorrow morning. First he took away our cow. Now your cow has borne a calf. We must do something. We will bury the stock of vari in the fold,' she suggested and the two of them executed the plan instantly. Isari skillfully covered the ground with cow dung wash. Balu's cart arrived at the appointed hour next morning. His cartman pulled up at Ziprya's door. Balu asked his cartman to go and fetch Ravlya. Ravlya came and greeted him.

'Tell this young man to return my seed,' he said to Ravlya.

'In the face of a bad harvest, how can he? He will surely return it next year,' Ravlya tried to convince him.

'He will have to pay three times more interest next year. Do you understand?' Balu lost his patience. He stormed into the house and searched for the granary only to find all containers empty. He turned to the fold and found the cow and the calf. He came out and asked Aatya about the cow.

'Seth, the cow belongs to Ziprya, my son,' Aatya tried his best to avoid confiscation.

'Aatya, let us not think of the seed you borrowed from me. My daughter-in-law has just delivered a baby but she can't lactate. It is a baby boy. Think of it. Give me your cow. When my grandson grows up, I will return your cow,' Balu's tone had changed now.

'Alright! You can take the cow. When your grandson is big enough to be weaned, I will come and take my cow,' Aatya gave his consent.

The cartman put the calf in the cart and fastened the rope of the cow to the rear shaft. Balu got on to the cart, secretly enjoying his success in tricking Aatya once again. As the cart nosed forward, the cow looked back and lowed.

The next day Devji came to take Asha. Ambu was pregnant for the third time. Asha was four years old now and yet a suckling baby. Isari could not wean her and sometimes fretted about it. The loss of the cow only added to her irritation. Devji enquired after her health and talked to her about the intension of his visit.

'Ambu is pregnant. She has a tough time looking after two children. Even if I take one to the farm, she cannot manage the other at home. She has asked me to bring Asha to help her out.'

'Devji, stay here for two days and help me carry the grass home. Balu has taken our cow for the second time though we owe him only eight champas of grains. Ziprya has changed and taken after his father. He too runs to Bhilati. Calls himself a wrestler! He doesn't miss a single contest.'

'I must leave early morning. Poor Ambu! She must be waiting for me. Two kids to look after and doing her share of housework at the same time! I do share her work. However, I must go back. Make rotis for Asha and we will set out early in the morning. We have to cross the hill before it gets hot.'

Aatya went fishing and brought fish for Devji. Isari ground maize,

baked five rotis and fried fish. The tiffin was ready. She then woke Devaji. He got ready and had his breakfast. 'This is for Ambu,' she said to him and handed over the tiffin. Devji lifted Asha and got going. Asha was smiling as Devji walked with Asha on his shoulder.

Narya and two of his accomplices had gathered gold and silver in burglaries. The two of them buried it without informing Narya and they passed away soon. They appeared in Narya's dream constantly. Narya was disturbed by the visitation and went from priest to priest. Ravlya sent him to Isarya who advised him to charm a fistful of grains at the spot he had seen in his dream. Narya came to Isarya with the charmed grains. Jet black in complexion and strongly built, he looked like a perfect robber with red eyes. When he arrived at Isarya's house, Sunati was amusing Gaju's baby. As he handed over the charmed grains to him he caught sight of Sunati.

'Is she your daughter, uncle?' he asked without taking his eyes off.

'She is Ziprya's sister,' answered Isarya and turned to the grains in his hand.

'Narya, your problem is difficult to solve. I can see the hidden wealth. The spot is right. But the two of them—the dead—are guarding it all the time like two serpents. They won't allow you even to touch it. If you try to get hold of it against their wishes, you will invite trouble for yourself,' Isarya warned him.

Narya followed Sunati to Ziprya's house. Ziprya was busy piling the sheaves of grass. He climbed down the stack and asked Sunati to bring a glass of water for Narya. He looked at her, running his eyes over her body from top to bottom, as she handed over the glass. 'There is a fair at Bodkikhadi this weekend. Do come for the wrestling contest,' he said to Ziprya before he left. Just then Isari came in and was taken aback as she caught glimpse of Narya.

'Who was he? Why do you bring home such a devil? Which place of the Bhils he belongs to? Have you forgotten that the Bhils from Chipi and Mohana had robbed us?' Isari rebuked him.

'I never invited him. Believe me, aai. He must have come to see uncle, I am sure. Uncle must have directed him to our house. He had a glass of water and left. He is the one who trained me in wrestling. He was telling me about the fair and the wrestling bout round this weekend. Before I leave, we must sell the grass. I will have to borrow



two carts,' Ziprya tried to steer clear of the charge.

At dawn, Murya and Bitya came with their carts. Ziprya loaded the carts and got ready to leave. He asked them to hurry since he knew that if they reached at mid-day they would get underpaid. Isari and Sunati also joined him on his instruction. They followed him with the bundle of faggot on their heads. They rested for a while on the top of the hill but when they saw that the carts and the men had already reached the river Panzara, they rushed to catch up with them. The grass was green and it fetched sixteen rupees per cart. Ziprya paid the cartmen two rupees and a half per cart by way of the rent. Isari and Sunati also sold the faggot for twelve aanas each to the grocer. When they returned all had lunch together. Ziprya gave Isari a sum of rupees twenty five and kept two for himself before he left for the fair at Bodkikhada. Isari and Sunati went to the weekly bazaar to shop for the essential commodities and then returned home.

Ziprya did not return home that night. He had eloped with Mangu, Jeevlya's wife, the two had absconded from the fair. No one at home knew about it. Manu felt worried over his absence and went to Ravlya to enquire. Ravlya pretended ignorance in this regard. He took the children to the river. Manu also accompanied him. They found Narya there. Ravlya amused the children, bathed them turn by turn and returned home. It was on the way that Ravlya shared with Manu the secret of Ziprya's elopement with Mangu.

'Aai, Uncle Ravlya says that Ziprya has run away with uncle Jeevlya's wife,' Manu briefed Isari.

On hearing these words, Aatya, who sat twisting the rope, rose in a fit of anger and rushed to Isari with the rope. Down came the rope on Isari's back with vengeance, leaving the red scars behind as a mark of Aatya's fury. Manu scuttled away in fear. Isari writhed in pain and groaned. Sunati was in Tukya's house and rushed to her. She twined her hands around Aatya's feet and dragged him out.

After a week or so, Ziprya and Mangu appeared at Ravlya's house. The news spread like fire that Ziprya, a Mavchi, and his wife had been staying with the Bhil community. It created a ruffle in the Mavchi community. They imagined that he would take to thieving, butchering animals at night after the Bhils. Their fury knew no bounds and a unanimous decision was taken. That Ziprya was defiled and unfit for any social interaction in the Mavchi community was

confirmed. However, it did not stop with his dismissal from his community. The next target was his family. A resolution was passed that no member of his family would be given any employment and that they would not be allowed to draw water from the well, that no woman in the village would ever talk to women in Ziprya's family or allow them to share their domestic flour-mills. They put a ban on their participation in the Mavchi community's religious and judiciary practices too.

Aatya and Isari paid a heavy price. No one in the village talked to Aatya and he took it out on Isari. Women mocked at her wherever she went. When the stream dried up, she went to the public well to draw water but the women turned their back on her and refused to give her the bucket. Isari fell ill and was bedridden now. No one except Parbata and Jura came to her. They brought her food in turns. Annoyed and harassed by the whole village, Aatya decided to leave. He pulled his house apart. Manu and Sunati helped carry the belongings on their head. Ziprya and Mangu also came to help them. All of them kept busy the whole day, shifting the flotsam and jetsam of communal fury. On the other hand, the men from Bhilati rushed to help them. They worked overnight and built a new house for Aatya and his family. A clean break with the Mavchi community! That was the end of this scuffle Isari was thrown into. Fate forced her to live with the Bhils. She worked on wages along with other women of the Bhil community.

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## **Aador Within and Without**

Aatya's house was ready. A few pieces of wood were left over. He passed on the remainder to Ziprya. Mangu was pregnant. Ziprya built a hut for her. He had no regular means of income. Often, he went with Ravlya to pick whatever he could. Isari secretly helped him with odd things. She had to take care that Aatya did not know about it. Ziprya somehow managed to pass the summer on his pickings and charity of his mother. Around the beginning of the rainy season, Ganpat came with a proposal.

'Send Ziprya to me. There is no one to look after me. If Ziprya comes and stays with me I will give half the proceeds from my farm to him,' Ganpat requested Aatya.

'Uncle, why don't you directly talk to him about it? He doesn't talk to me. That day he purchased four bullocks against two from the Vanjaris. He has two ploughs now,' Aatya answered.

Ganpat went back and Aatya led his herd for grazing. Isari was grinding grains at the door. Just then a crow flew over and perched on the roof. Its harsh cry attracted the attention of Isari. 'We have not had our lunch and lo, the guests are on their way. Go and get me the grains ground from somewhere,' she said to Sunati. The crow had heralded the arrival of guests.

Sunati went to Ravlya's house and Mangu helped her with the mill. Ravlya and Ziprya were preparing a dish of meat. Atu provided water to them. Ravlya cooked some special parts of the goat—the heart and the chest. All had lunch together. Sunati returned home with mutton and flour. Now Isari cooked mutton and made rotis. She was about to serve—everyone when Manu arrived with Devji.

'Look here mother, we have a real guest today. Devji has come,' he said to Isari.

Devji looked piteous. He sat down for lunch.

‘How is Asha?’ asked Aatya. ‘She is just a baby, not even weaned from her mother. She never left her mother. Always suckling at her mother’s breast! She would not allow her to work. Does she pester Ambu?’ Aatya was worried about both.

Devji sighed and spoke in great distress, ‘Ambu delivered the child ten days back. However, she is not well. There is swelling on her entire body. I took her to the priest but she is not responding to his remedies. She asked me to send for you. I have come to take you all.’

This was a bad news and unexpected too. Isari beat her chest and cried. Tears rolled down from all eyes around. Isari’s wailing attracted the attention of the people from Bhilati. They dropped in. Jura consoled Isari. In the meantime Devji went to see Isarya and Tukya. He informed them about Ambu’s condition. They all got ready to leave with Devji.

‘We will set out as soon as the star comes out,’ he said to them.

After the night’s walk they reached home and were told that the dead body was just removed for burial. Shocked by the news they rushed in that direction. Ambu’s dead body was kept on the ground for all to catch a last glimpse of her. Again, they resumed their walk with the charpoy on which Ambu lay. Aatya, Isari, Tukya and Ziprya threw themselves on the charpoy and cried. Isari cried her heart out and was inconsolable. People had to disperse them with great difficulty. They lifted the charpoy and Aatya, Isarya and Tukya squeezed in to find space underneath the charpoy. They walked along as if they were carrying her on their heads. Isari held little Asha to her chest and cried. People held her by the arms and pulled her out. Two of Ambu’s fathers-in-law brought her home. However, looking at Ambu’s new-born child, she could not control herself and allowed the tears to flow continuously. She was drowned in grief. After the last ceremony was over, women went to the river for a bath. They paid homage to Ambu by drawing the farm in her name, watered it and came home.

Ambu’s father-in-law sent a few men to bring liquor from Pati, a nearby village. They came back with three big earthen pots of liquor. One was passed on to the women and two to the men. People sprinkled wine in her name at the spot where she died and started crying together. After some time they stopped crying and started

drinking wine. All went tipsy but there was still enough stock of unused liquor. People would not leave. Finally, Isarya and Tukya poured the wine at the same spot followed by Isari doing the same thing with wine in the women's custody. Everyone greeted the bereaved family and left.

Kagdya consoled Isari. 'Don't shed tears, sister. We will avenge Ambu's death. Her mother-in-law is responsible for her death. We don't mind going to jail. Two of us will go to jail for killing her and the third will look after the farm. We will not leave her unpunished,' they reiterated.

Isari bathed the new born baby and brought goat's milk for her. Kagdya entreated them to eat something but none touched the food. Isarya and Tukya passed the night by the fire in the yard and Isari rocked the baby to sleep in the swing. She was drowned in the sea of tears.

Surya had bought new clothes and jewellery for Ambu. He had to sell liquor for that. He had buried her with these things on. At midnight, the Bhils from Pati dug the ground where she was buried. They removed the new clothes and jewellery from the dead body and ran away. They did not even care to bury the naked body. Aatya saw the flashes of torches in the cemetery and suspected the heinous act on the part of thieves. He requested Kagdya and Isarya to go and check the fact. However, they dismissed the idea by saying that the spirits must have descended to eat her up. They did not want to invite trouble for themselves.

At dawn, Surya kept the cart ready for Aatya and others. Aatya, Isarya and Tukya got on to the cart along with Asha and Hadkya, Ambu's son. Isari too got in with the new-born baby. Surya walked with the cart upto the hill. As they passed by the cemetery, they halted for a few minutes and cried. It was too dark to see anything. By the time they reached the hill of Waghya, the god, the day had dawned and it was sunny.

'Uncle, we will complete the mourning rites on the fifth day only. Come on Tuesday. After the mourning comes to an end, I will accompany you to your village. We are well off but I don't care for my father's wealth. I will work hard and bring up my son.' Surya was overwhelmed with grief. They all got off the cart and went their

way. Surya took his cart and rode homewards. When he passed the cemetery, he got off and went to the spot. He broke down seeing the naked dead body of his wife and cried out. Kagdya who was working in the farm close to the cemetery, heard him and rushed to him. It was his turn to be shocked now. He went home, took the new clothes of his younger brother's wife and returned to the cemetery with spades. Surya covered the body in new clothes and buried Ambu. They covered the ground with stones and thorns. On their way home, they saw Ambu's second mother-in-law running away in fear of her life to Bandharpada, her parents' place. Kagdya and Nimbya chased her, but she saved herself by hiding in the farm. She never returned to Karanji.

Aatya and Isari reached home in the evening. When people saw her crying as she walked, they came to see her. Women in the neighbourhood came and cried with her.

All of Aatya's nanny goats were big with young ones. So he borrowed milk for the baby from Isarya's house for two days. On the third day, Ziprya went to Pimpalner to bring back his cow. He went to Balu's house and requested him to return his cow. Rolling his eyes in anger, Balu shouted at him, 'You bastard! You remember the cow but conveniently forget the seeds you owe me. You scoundrel! Get lost. You will never get the cow.' Ziprya returned home. Mangu served him a meal. He went to Isari to seek information about the mourning rites.

On the fifth day of Ambu's death, Aatya, Ziprya, Isarya, Tukya and Isari left for Karanji quite early. By the time they reached their destination, it was afternoon. All preparations were made. Special food was prepared for the dead by the sarvan and women sat around the basket of food and cried. When Isari, Aatya and the rest arrived the women came out with the basket. The sarvan walked ahead of all with the basket on his head. On reaching the burial ground in the cemetery, each one offered a morsel to the dead person and returned after taking a bath. After lunch it was time for the ceremonial good-bye to the survivor. A rough blanket was spread out on the ground. Surya stood at the centre. Everyone came and offered a rupee or two to him, hugged him and went away. Only outstation members stayed on. There was yet another ritual to be performed. It was the

sarvan's privilege to read the predictions about the next birth of the dead. He sifted some flour on the ground behind the hearth. He placed a bowl of rice and a cup of wine on it and covered it all with a big inverted basket. In the morning he lifted the basket and interpreted the signs on the flour.

'Your daughter-in-law is reborn as a serpent. Look at this track made in the flour. The serpent has eaten the rice and drunk the wine and left,' he told Kagdya.

Isari's reaction was heart-rending, 'My little sparrow! Why did my daughter have to be reborn as a serpent? She will only get thorns. Oh god, why did you not send her back as a human being?'

Isari, Aatya, Devji, Ziprya, Isarya and Tukya returned to their village in the evening. It was summer and the cattle were returning home when they stepped within the precincts of their village.

Mangu delivered the child in due course of time. Ziprya borrowed two champas of nagli from Ganpat for her. Isari ground it for her and she pulled on with that. Isari had two more mouths to feed now—Devji and Hadkya. Surya too packed up and came to stay with Isari within a few days of Ambu's death. It was a family of eight now. Ziprya also had his meals here because his wife had delivered the baby. Devji and Manu would complain but Isari did not entertain their complaints. She took them to task instead. 'He is your own brother. He can't eat food prepared by his wife for five weeks. Mind you, he shall eat here,' she asserted.

Days passed. Devji, Manu and Surya went to the forest daily. Sunati also joined them. They chopped wood and collected the faggots and carried the stacks on their heads. On their way, they rested for a while in the barn. Devji reminded them that they had to be careful while crossing the road. They needed to be cautious until they entered the village. The government guards often hid themselves among the trees. Once out of the danger zone, they had nothing to fear.

They crossed the river and entered the colonies. Each one fetched some money depending on the size of the stack. Devji and Surya earned five rupees each whereas Manu got four. Sunati earned the lowest; only three and a half. Devji bought four champas of jwar and salt, chilli and tobacco. He bought some crunchy things for Asha

and Hadkya. Isari was delighted and distributed the same between the two. She prepared the porridge of jwar for them. Having had their breakfast, Devji, Manu and Surya again made for the forest. Isari took the left over to Ziprya and was surprised to see him sharing Mangu's share of porridge. Isari warned him against such a thing and tried to convince him that Mangu must eat enough to maintain health so that the baby could receive proper nourishment. She also advised him to go and collect firewood along with the other boys.

Ziprya went to the forest with his axe. Mangu handed over the baby to Isari and followed him with the rope. When Devji, Manu, Sunati and Surya returned from the forest they were tired. They threw down their stacks and sat in the verandah. Isari gave them a glass of water and requested them to take Ziprya with them from the next day. Devji flared up at the suggestion, 'He is not a kid. He can fend for himself. Moreover, it is not easy to dodge the forest guards. We work under pressure. The fear of getting caught hangs heavily on our minds as we approach the market.'

With her hands on her belly, Jambu came crying in pain. She rolled on the ground. The pain in her stomach was unbearable. Isari made a paste of ash and applied it to her stomach. However, she had no relief. Isarya came and made a drink of lime and gave it to her. Just then Ganpat came walking with the support of his stick. 'Jambu has severe pain in the stomach. She can't go to work. Why not send Devji to work in her place from tomorrow?' he requested Aatya. Manu escorted Ganpat back home.

Much before day break, Devji, Manu and Surya were on their toes to the bazaar. After they left, Isari went to wake Ziprya. Ziprya too trudged the path soon. Mangu also followed him with the stack. On the way, they met Devji and Surya who were returning from the bazaar. Surya put Ziprya on his guard, 'Take care. We met the guards in the lane.'

The moment Ziprya and Mangu entered the lane and hit the deal, the guards snapped at them, 'Put down the stacks. You will go to jail. You have stripped the forest of the trees. You rascals!'

Putting the stacks down, Ziprya and Mangu stood there trembling with fear. The guard winked at the grocer who wanted to buy the stack and screamed at Ziprya, 'You bastard! Get lost. I will give you



only one chance. If I catch you again, you will go to jail and pay the fine too.'

Mangu and Ziprya did not even wait to hear any more and took to heels. When they returned home they found Isari worried over the delay. Ziprya had made up his mind, 'I will starve at home but, I will never sell wood,' he said to Isari.

The forest guards and other government officials had struck such a terror in the minds of the village folk that they stopped collecting and selling wood for livelihood. There was no other job opportunity available to them—neither in their village nor outside. The scorching heat of boiling summer, when added to the fire within—the fire of hunger—worked havoc. They could not trust the rain either. Starvation and death waited for them at every step.

Now they took to selling leaves of tendu and palash. There was demand for it. But soon the supply exceeded the demand and the prices fell. They could earn only eight or ten aanas by way of wages for two days. Starvation took a heavy toll from Mangu. She looked pale and became thin. She could not breast-feed her baby for want of milk. Ziprya did not even bother to sell leaves. Mangu started selling leaves along with Sunati. She had to leave her baby with Isari when she went out for work.

Ganpat came to Aatya with a work-proposal for Ziprya. The rains had just made their appearance. Accordingly, Ziprya was to work with Devji on Ganpat's farm. He also offered grains to avoid starvation. He was ready to give one fourth of the produce to Ziprya. Aatya passed the message to Ziprya and came home. He saw that Manu, Sunati and Surya were busy arranging the leaves in order and making piles. He advised them to go and work on the farm instead. Isari was highly critical of his unwanted advice and snapped at him, 'How dare you advise them what they should do? An idler! Have you ever earned your daily roti? No!' she spoke with contempt. 'He will have it free. He has grown up without being wise,' she said to the children.

Manu and Sunati laughed to their heart's content. Aatya kept quiet because he had become deaf during his illness.

All the children went to the bazaar to sell leaves. The sweetmeat seller bought the leaves from them. With the money they bought jwar and dalya for Asha and Hadkya.

Time passed without making any change in their status. They lived from hand to mouth for most of the times and even starved. Ziprya and Devji worked on Ganpat's farm whereas Manu and Surya worked on theirs. Isari, Mangu and Sunati went out in search of work. Asha looked after Hadkya and Mangu's little baby. Aatya had his flock of at least a hundred goats to look after. This year the yield was much better due to sufficient rains. Manu and Surya were seen with Ravlya now-a-days. They tilled the land during the day and at night went pilfering with Ravlya. With the passage of time, a new occurrence was noticed. The frequency of Narya's visit to Isarya's house had increased. He pretended that he came to consult Isarya on the buried wealth but the truth was that he came for Sunati. He always took the children to the river and spent time amusing them. One day Narya said to Manu, 'There is a fair at Pimpalner on Monday. We will go there on the eve of the fair. See me tonight.'

Manu worked for the whole day and when evening came, he rushed to see the impersonation. Sunati and Hira, Tukya's daughter, followed him. When Manu saw them following him he hid himself behind the stone memorial. They looked for him and failed to find him. It was getting dark and they returned home.

Manu relaxed and stood up. He was pleased to have tricked the girls. A few boys happened to pass by the memorial. They were scared to see Manu and took to heels. 'It's me, Manu!' he shouted. 'Don't run away. I hid in order to dodge the girls. They wanted to come to the fair. I did not want to take their responsibility. You know how those men get started when they see girls. These men are not gentlemen. They touch their breasts or pinch their bottoms. They even snatch the girls and run away with them. What a bad fair it is! What bad men! They won't allow the girls to have fun. Those Shahus! Last year they kidnapped a girl and no one knows where she is.'

All the boys halted and rested for a while. Bitya suggested that they should wait for all other boys from their village to arrive and proceed only when everyone was together since the area was covered with trees and it was notorious too for robberies. Pilgrims were often attacked and robbed in this area.

Manu and Narya entertained themselves over the night. In the morning they went to the river for a bath. Sunati and Heera came

with food packed for them. They were having their meal together. Just then they heard the sounds of drum. Narya asked Manu to proceed, adding that he would join him in a short while. Manu went to the wrestling ground with Sunati and Heera. Narya came with two rolls of *paan*. He winked at Manu and whispered into his ears asking him to eat one and to give the other to Sunati. Manu ate one and gave the other to his sister without giving any intimation to Heera. Narya watched Sunati's movements eagerly. He was curious to know whether Sunati would give half of it to Heera. Sunati too watched him secretly through the corners of her eyes. She was thinking about her life. She was coming of age and had no proposals from her own community. What if he was black and belonged to the other tribe? 'If I accept this man I will at least have sexual pleasure and security,' she reflected. She ate the paan without sharing it with Heera. Manu was tempted by the wrestling event and having won once, played on. Tukya came searching for Heera and took her home. When the wrestling competition was over Manu thought of Sunati. She was not to be seen anywhere. He looked everywhere for her in vain and came home. He asked Isari if she had returned. Isari did not know whether she felt enraged or worried. She took Manu to task.

'To hell with this girl! A bitch! Must have slept with someone! She will not come to this house now. And how careless you are! Always running after the Bhils! Go and look for her in the morning. If you find her, give her away to the mahar. Gaju also reported to me that she had seen Asha being taken away by school boys. What can I do? Cooking, baby sitting, working on the farm, picking vegetables! Is there just me to do it all?' Isari could not put up with all this.

She went to Ziprya and shared the happenings with him. Instead of sympathising with her, he held her responsible for this. Isari had nothing to say. She picked up Hadkya and came home. Forgetting for a minute that Sunati was not at home she called, 'Sunati, please hold Ambu's son.' Jambu was moved by her mother's single handed battle against time. She took the little one from her mother and tried to amuse him. Isari looked at her long and regretted her fate. A girl who never menstruated and was plagued by severe stomach ache stood before her holding the fruit of an extinct tree. 'What a mockery of fate!' she thought.

The proposal to open a school in the village was approved and signed the previous year only. However, in the absence of a house with a roof for the school and for want of interest in teaching the tribal children on the part of teachers, the school had remained a dream. Two teachers came and went. The third one was a Shahu, nevertheless he was committed. He opened the school in the open air, in the verandah of Rama's house. He did not mind living in the small room of the house. Ranu, Rama's mother, prepared lunch for him. However, after a month, there were signs of the school being closed. Rama's mother complained against the students. 'They defile our water and vessels and make a mess of my house. They are sons of the Bhils and social interaction with them is not allowed in our community,' she told the teacher one day.

The teacher took all the boys to the top of the hill nearby. He cleared a patch of ground underneath a big tree and taught the children. In the evening on their way back to the village Asha asked him, 'What about building a hut on the top of the hill?' The teacher looked at the other children who unanimously supported him. He asked them all to come well equipped with their tiffins and spades, axes and scythes the next day.

Asha and Posalya, Gaju's son, walked with scythes. Kesu, Sukya and Aatvarya brought axes since they were older than others. They went into the forest with a few others. Asha and Posalya went to Aatya's farm to get the reeds. A few more went with them. The rest came with sticks and planks for the door. Asha returned with stacks of reed. It was a day of work for all little hands, busier than ants perhaps. They procured everything that was necessary to construct the hut which was to be their Alma Mater.

A day after, many hands joined the construction. The entire team of about thirty boys and four girls climbed the hill, their hearts dancing with delight and minds overflowing with enthusiasm. Some dug the ground to install the poles while others fixed the shafts. A few of them helped to prepare the structure for the walls. Girls sprinkled water on the ground. Asha and Chuna went to the cowshed and brought cow dung. Reshmi and Bhanu gave the ground a cow dung wash. Asha and Chuna belonged to the Mavchi tribe and Reshmi and Bhanu hailed from the Bhil tribe. Finally, they covered

the walls and the roof with hay. The school-cum-hut was ready. Everyone felt proud and gathered around the teacher. It was time to return home. They climbed down the hill. When Asha looked back, the distant hut on the top looked like aador. She shouted in joy, 'Sir, the aador!' Down the hill there were aadors in the hamlets too. Asha remembered Isari's words 'Sunati must have succumbed to the fire within.' The aador below had taken away Sunati. The aador above had kindled the flame in Asha's heart.

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## Glossary

<i>Aador</i>	: Ground burned in preparation of seed
<i>Ambadi</i>	: a plant, leaves of which are used as vegetable, sour in taste
<i>Babi</i>	: daughter-in-law
<i>Babul</i>	: a tree with thorns all over, commonly found everywhere in India. The tribals believe that if a pregnant woman's hand is pricked with the thorn when she dies, she never returns as a goblin
<i>Bajra</i>	: kind of grain
<i>Bhadla</i>	: red coarse grain
<i>Bhagar</i>	: refined grain secured after processing kodara.
<i>Bhagat</i>	: priest
<i>Bhil</i>	: a tribe
<i>Bhilati</i>	: a small colony
<i>Bhilava</i>	: edible nut
<i>Dalya</i>	: ribbon/sweets
<i>Dhupali</i>	: a tree
<i>Ira</i>	: share
<i>Kasur</i>	: kind of grains
<i>Kodara</i>	: inferior grain poisonous and eaten after processing carefully; specially found in Navapur region
<i>Kudachi</i>	: a short upper garment worn by tribal women

<i>Kuduchi</i>	: a plant, the leaves are used as vegetable
<i>Kulith</i>	: pulses with nutrition value
<i>Mahua</i>	: a tree from the blossoms of which liquor is distilled
<i>Mav</i>	: kind of grain
<i>Mavchi</i>	: a tribe
<i>Nagli</i>	: grain, <i>raggy</i>
<i>Paan</i>	: betel leaves eaten after lunch or dinner in India. It helps digestion
<i>Palash</i>	: a tree with red flowers, mainly blossoms in summer
<i>Payar</i>	: kind of fig tree
<i>Peeper</i>	: fruit of a tree
<i>Rangatroda</i>	: a plant the bark of which can be used as medicine
<i>Rui</i>	: a tree of moderate height. Its leaves have medicinal usage
<i>Saravan</i>	: one who reads future
<i>Sava</i>	: kind of grain
<i>Tendu</i>	: a tree, leaves of which are used to make tobacco rolls
<i>Tolambi</i>	: seeds of ambadi from which oil is extracted
<i>Umber</i>	: kind of fig tree
<i>Vajkand</i>	: wild edible roots having power to produce sickness if used carelessly
<i>Vanjari</i>	: travelling traders
<i>Vari</i>	: grass bearing a grain
<i>Zira seeds</i>	: wild grains

